

# THE WANDERING



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Distanced from partner Marsha and her daughter Matty by physical and psychic wanderings into geographic places, historic 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, on conscience and commitment.

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### Also by this Writer

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## THE WANDERING

### Self and Other

Dear Marsha, I'm not sure you care that there's a huge distance between us still, so I gathered in a bunch all the stories I sent you one by one. I wasn't sure they made sense since my topic seems as ungainly as life itself, and it's not that I see myself as a philosopher but more a guy who in slouching away from his fictive home realised he had always been in some desultory act of wandering, and by extension saw that everyone else is as well, and that scarcely anyone knows how or why since most of us are sleepwalking. Yet it isn't bearable for rational beings to wander aimlessly, and we begin to make weird efforts to grasp our complexes, and this is by the way how the self-referencing miasma of names and forms called language rules us, its mental arabesques vaulting endlessly out of themselves. Because 'as rain-fed streams by inexorable paths wander to the sea and rise again to cloud-mountain and sky', the fact of wandering can't be contained, and certainly no chronicle of mine, whether fictive or autobiographical, can claim to fathom it. Your correspondent, while running from indigestible facts of his life and claiming to turn and face them, resorts to fiction, addressing you, Marsha, as 'significant other' or whatever you may be to me, so that I might speculate on the nature and cause of estrangement, of drifting... And Marsha, though I am prone to projecting florid storytelling edifices to book-end all our psychological and karmic and metaphysic and geographic journeyings, and while I'm fairly sure it will piss you off, I ask you to see there is often no expression of wandering but the poetic... or maybe I find it convenient that our relationship makes poetic sense only from a distance. Anyway, at the risk of drowning in solipsism and narcissism, which you perennially (and probably rightly) rail at, I feel compelled to say that for me there is no escape from seeking the heart of wandering... and from dumping the results on you.

Here's a grandiose tale to initiate all that follows. 'Once upon a forever time in a forever beginning, an inconceivable Emperor conjures out of himself... the Other. Willing a guileful forgetting in his own heart the Emperor says: Can there be oneness without parts, light without darkening, emperor without dominions? In me is the source of all streams that flow forever, and I am inexplicable power, pulsing energy, light that thickens, conjuror of name, atom, time, space. I am all creatures of the darkening, the maker of relationship and cause and effect, of all journeys back to the heart. I initiate the unstoppable descent into fiction, and just as 'in the beginning was the word and the word was with god', so through language as name and form I generate all that can be grasped. I create the *individual* who embeds himself in karmic relationship by channels of intellect, imagination and sense, and since these channels are nothing but ideas in my eternal mind, they are doomed never to be fulfilled. Thus

no substantive thing ever happens... so that this wandering, this strange seeking of a home from whence the ego falsely appears to be exiled, is but a poetic dalliance, an eddy, a *becoming*. And between light and shadow there is no reconciliation, so that my wandering into all channels of the possible, into all corners of the empire of experience, is an abnegation, a fleeing of the Other. Here is the alpha and omega of all wanting, of sparring phantoms, filial objects, arch enemies. I am Faust's desire, Lacan's mirror... Yet how can I ever seek myself? How can that which *is* be exiled? Here is the riddle of Samsara the wandering! I am a wanderer in my own fiction, I am Faust who drunk in wanting drinks his soul away, I am the ascetic who dissects worlds, fundamentalist who murders a thousand victims. I negotiate oceans of dark uncertainty, oceans of pitiless light, and having drunk red oceans of blood I nestle again in sunlit innocence on soft-heaven planets, gazing into new streams that lead far away... and always I want to follow them where they go! Even by streams of paradise I pursue the waters to plains where they spill in dust, to mines where they are boiled in fire... and again to the sea... where all streams end in Me. I do this because I *can*. I am free to wander, and in wandering I am (never) free'.

And Marsha, I search for the shadow, for the anima and animus, the guiding woman-man within. I am the shambling Tarot Fool with head in the sky and feet in shit! I tell you there is a time when every child born in innocence must become as if a stranger to himself. One day he looks in a mirror and sees a face that witnesses *him*. Though nothing exists outside the conversation of himself, the mystery is: *who is that?* Now everything turns necessarily strange, unnerved, indigestible, and as this child grows and the further in wondering he goes, the more he slips to forgetfulness. And little by little he craves a kind of cribbed sleep, a refuge in fate and circumstance and history where he repeats himself countless in the moribund gyration of repetitive lives... But there is a time at last when this wanderer can take no more the sickness or loneliness or confusion or frustrated absurdity! - and then he hears a fainting voice as if very far off, as if an alien bird in a vaulted sky, and he wonders dimly from whence it came... and then begins a halting journey back the way he came, a retracing of steps, a rediscovery. This is the notion of Karma, of *Cause*, and look! - he snares himself in that web even as he goes, for by rooting in his past he walks as if backward into future (since the future is ever his past), getting deeper-trapped in webs of time and cause, blundering in places remembered or unremembered, touching feelings raw or displaced in gone days and centuries (which are of course not gone at all), where he grasps at ancestors and 'other lives' and speculates on what he and significant others used to be and might be yet. Meanwhile he feels the crowding geography of the *present*, the need to eat and breathe and walk and be somewhere here in sun and rain and north and south, and this is the killing dilemma of being in his body. And the things in his earthly wandering loom as symbols for the crowding in of the unconscious, and all are but the projection of inner *lack*. He wonders how his ego, which is but a phantom of want, managed to conjure its shadow dance with an ungraspable *other*. Is

the only way out of this deathly dance to dance some more? And more? All his acts are relational, he sees, all his dances are of *anima-animus*. Thus he cries and wanders.

And yes, there is a family in the present world of which our wanderer cannot deny he is a part: his 'partner' Marsha and her daughter Matty. How often before did he engage these actors in his gangliated dramas: as perpetrators, victims, warriors, runaways, as gulled repetitors of his past and emergent ghosts of his future? And here is a razor's edge dilemma: to nullify the past or to embrace it? For the past is the heavy cloak of a fey Emperor, and its strands and baubles dangle agonisingly in the dust... such that in this gyre of incarnations he may always trudge this pilgrimage of repetition, this narcissistic romantic melange of past repression and present neurosis. Yet perhaps... there is a kind of wandering that is no wandering at all... maybe *in the timeless here and empty now* - a traveller might cultivate no reason, make no decision, never succeed, sieve his acts in the intuitive inchoate amnesiac lost... as if all he *is* is borderless, as if Anywoman and Everyman, and a murderer of all thoughts, a spirit without peculiar marks, dancer of joke dances, breathing the illusion of himself, wandering nowhere in the nothingness he already is. For he who has the power to forget himself is surely master of all with which he began... But the mind is the liquid river of wanting, and each of its unresting waves is a strangling narrative of fear. Suddenly, let there be none! No wave can ever be what or where it is, unless we declare it to be so. It may be labelled *now*, may be labelled *here*, but it is certain it is *nowhere*. Marsha, hear. There can be no 'thing' that ever happened but *this*. Whenever else? Should we lament the thing, as history or loss? We claim that waves surge without number, but how indefinite: there assuredly are none. And if there be times without number, there be none. In emptiness let narratives try to be! Let them spinning and weaving machinate and stagger and gasp and flail and wander without end. Bring them on and let them vanish! Bring them on, let them vanish. Bring them... let them vanish.'

Thus this writer craves his special reader for his special narrative. Read, Marsha. To you he proposes a dark bouquet of letters. Let them be strewn, let them float like flotsam in a stream and find their way to the sea, a sea of healing, where the sentient One nestles always, quiet-still under waves of change and circumstance in his submarine cave of the heart where no narratives beat. Let him neither wish nor lament. Amid all cacophonous history, let there be none. Amid blusterous change let there be none. This wandering ever was and ever was not. *Now here, nowhere*, the Sentient One whispers. And by his whispering... we begin.

### **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 deep 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-alloof 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 'wriggle 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 unruffable 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

funking 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.'

### **Written on the Wind**

Blank writes: 'Years ago I met a traveller from an ancient land, known as a *Shastri*. He was a super-astrologer, interpreter of the *Akashic Records*, a set of books holding information on individual souls. I can hear Marsha's bursting laugh. How can there possibly be information written on a soul? Is it like the government snooping on our emails? But the idea is that though we tread paths that seem individual, we are marionettes of a deeper Soul. It doesn't matter how many individuals there may be, or whether they are in physical bodies; the generic blueprints, the formulae for all pathways and strands, are recorded in these books... The dark-skinned Shastri sits astride his cushion in a semi-dark hotel room coralled by a low wall of volumes. A slightly lurid hawaiian shirt spills over his slacks and hides a paunch. (They say he enjoys his food.) His sandals are tossed to the side. He barely looks up from behind thick glasses, and there's a prickly stretch of silence after he has acquired my birth details. Though I'm impatient for insight into strands beyond the superficiality of my lifetime trail through material culture (and am willing to pay for it) there is a strange uprooting fear within... An influential friend warned me against wanting to know past and future. 'Dude, it undercuts commitment to the emptiness of *now*. Too much emphasis on your crappy personal story' he said. 'No astrologer is infallible! Why be sucked into events according to someone's schedule?' Shastri begins, and his tone is matter-of-fact. 'The so-called future is an ideal, based on trends that may certainly be altered by your attitude.' Next he lists a string of events unknowable to anyone but me: his calling card. Now he begins to lay out a picture of unfinished traumas that pull strings in this lifetime and hint at a logic of future. 'I speak only of karma from significant lives that *ripens* in this life (he says). In some lives you sleep while in others you are open to change, and fight to evolve. Now you are in a happy position to write it all down'. This with a touch of irony. And my unfolding story begins to sound achingly like a B-grade soap opera, though it doesn't occur to me to question the events as facts. Finally I ask him about 'significant others'. And you are part of it, Marsha. You and me are entwined as it were. We have history, we have form. The Shastri has a rule about relationships and their success. There are 'three thirds' he says. One third is you, one third is the other and one third is the changes wrought by each on the other 'till the destined meeting of hearts and minds is complete'. A marriage for instance requires a good half of this shared third (18% of 33% as it were) in order to survive and grow. Conversely, a marriage that has achieved most of its portion (say 30% of 33%) has run its course, and must now either turn to the ethereal and sibling-platonic or disappear forever. It is said that if two people are born to engage, no power on earth can stop it, and if that engagement is over no power on earth can bring it back. Life is but a web of relationships made in heaven, and no doubt

every turgid bit of our history shall be lived out. Don't think that I invent the astrologer to justify an obsession with past, that I create fictitious karmic strands to shelve today's problems. The soothsayer pricks our imagination, exhumes dormant loose-ended strands of truth, picks at knots of unresolved things. It is a question of whether we are interested in what is not yet past! Rather, what throbs as absolute present? And when loosened, the knot no doubt gives way to meshes and strands at profounder levels in the unending fabric of ourselves. And we have to deal with them as we may. Marsha, knowing your ways, you'll see why I hesitate to talk about it. But I have to, and I ask you to listen.

### **Abandoned**

'We need our parents' lives to matter so we can validate our own, even if we need to hate them. Marsha dodges the parent subject like the plague, but I, Blank, am a self-appointed soother of her sores. Instead of trying to convince her of a thing I tell stories. Is it cowardly, corrupt? I need some way to talk to her! I have discovered from an elderly nurse who tended her father Len in his last days, that the father wrote a memoir. When I said I knew Marsha, the nurse put the document (handwritten on rough pages) in my hands. I had the feeling she'd read it. It seems Len was a craftsman and boat builder by trade. I soon discover he wrote as if wanting to make a *list*, a count of facts. Absent are the subterranean feeling-rivers that might have made bigger sense of his clearly taciturn and concrete world. It seems he demanded some kind of reckoning before the closing of the gates. Yet how many 'facts' can there be in a life, how many sand grains on the beaches of eternity? Facts, events, statistics: they are idiocy to me, like a condom stretched around a bulging rock! People tabulate the utterly gone because they see a future indistinguishable from the past: that is, none. You and I are continuously obliterated in place and time and circumstance, yet we are coat-hooked by the undigested past. We even ingest the karma of blood ancestors. None of this is in the least about time, but about nature and its *recurrence*. We must dredge the past for one reason only: to transform it, to release ourselves. Easier said than done! Collectors of facts like Len covet only the calcified stones of a necklace and never acknowledge the thread. And at the very end the factual man flails in his whirlpool of sorrow and need. There is nothing left now but to corral all his beasts in the warm spit-pool of memory, where they swim in nostalgial vaulted light. And like the ring through the nose of these ambling beasts, they become his zombie impulsion to hope, to invention of a future. But future is *Groundhog Day*, the hell of repetition! Hints dropped by Shastri about Len confirm that years after he walked out on his family he ended his days in a bare seaside town, performing turgid rounds in a little knot of places. Shastri called it 'closing the circle'. Maybe he craved routine, longed for a home. Perhaps his world seemed to close in as spectres of the past whispered ever more rudely in his ears. Or perhaps the mind turned feeble and the man as if in an abandoned house still full of his own furniture started to wander like a spook, little by little severing himself from its multifarious bits and rooms that now seemed the agglutinated suspensions of a lost century... the mind closing on itself as if refusing the

old electric connectors that once let it ecstatically bloom. And something private shuts itself away long before the clogging of the synapses. Perhaps it is a great *refusal*, distaste for participating, distaste for domesticity, great boredom or depression, welcoming of the end of breath. Everywhere, there are ragged ones cowering inside elderly bodies they no longer want, in mind-abandoned rooms, rotting in Pleasantville homes, darkly lost, abandoned by their own will. Rudolf Steiner said we must forget, that we need to forget. How else may we clear the decks of time, prepare the soul to tread again the wide road of the future, he said. But this preparing is a science, a subtle art, greatest of endeavours. We must treat the repeating of the past as anathema. We should face it, face it, then let, let it go! Understand the predicament, understand the cause of sorrow - then quietly close that door and go beyond.

For Len, the past continually whispered the names of daughter Marsha and Jean his wife. Len surely ran away from her! When a woman becomes tight and controlling such that a man's only ragged option is to wander, there is a kind of psychic reversal. He turns passive, turns victim to his *anima* even while she seethes under the strings of her *animus*... And for a lost daughter, what a cock-eyed *animus* is a runaway father. Why should *I* want Marsha to blunder in notionless cellars of her future without coming to a reckoning? I want to lift her up, because I can't stand the waste. And her waste applies to me because she's part of my need and therefore of my waste. Sure, I patronise her by saying she needs help, or that I am a substitute for Len, but the truth is I want to make sense of the fact that she will not love me, that she needs to rip her *own* daughter away from me, that she wants to hurt me because of other men. To hell with meaningless death-future! She is and was a beauty. I don't want it to crumple and fade. Marsha without a quiet mind and a soft heart is a tragedy, and she doesn't know it. Not yet.

There is a peculiar scene in Len's diary, referred to over and over as if a *leitmotif*, involving a boat. He had been building his eighteen-foot cabin craft for many months in his shed on the slipway, till the day he deemed it ready for launch into the (uninviting) waters of the local bay. ...Little Marsha has at times come to watch her father, though mother Jean does not. Len is no talker, but his dedicated efforts hypnotise the child. One day in early spring, when the mild weather has not yet established itself, he asks the family to sail with him, on his maiden voyage as it were. Despite his wife's resistance Len espies little Marsha to be keen. At first all bodes well: after suitable gathering of food, wrapping up warm, adjustment to lifejackets and getting sea-legs amid wind and wave - a peaceable hour or two is spent bobbing in forgiving waters a mile or two offshore. And soon, as if a gift from the deep, a pod of dolphins appears; they are moved to investigate the boat and to gambol about. And the three are able to share a moment of unthinking delight, and Marsha calls out that she actually touched the skin of one of the playful puppy creatures. I want to take them home! she cries. There's food and drink after this, and as the three sit at ease on the breathing water, it is almost as if the day's purpose



has been sweetly and deftly fulfilled. But beyond small mercies, we must bend to the warp and weft of *karma*. Soon the wind begins to whip itself, and Jean, looking into wee Marsha's eyes, firmly suggests they turn for shore. Not to be ordered by a woman, the husband delays, scanning the seascape with semi-wether eye, his own unruffled captain. But the wind has other ideas, and is already beating a loud rhythm, ruffling the water about them, pulling their hair to and fro like a cantankerous bully boy. Len at last puts the nose to shore, and little Marshie clings to him for reassurance, yet he communicates nothing. Now the boat is swaying and lurching hard. At two hundred metres from the beach the thing tips over and Marsha and her mother are thrown over the side. Like a slab the cold hits them as they slide under the green-black surge. As they surface Len is shouting. He throws a ring and they cling to it. He can't reach them. The boat is swept away. Mother and daughter cling together in fright. But the commotion has been seen from shore, and figures are running on the beach. Jean has the fortitude to push them in that direction and the waves do the rest. Mother and daughter, freezing and semi-traumatised, are pulled out by a fisherman. They are ushered to a cottage and brought into the warmth of a living room. The weather has meanwhile deteriorated, become a real squall. Hours go by and night comes on. A coastguard is said to have seen a craft drifting offshore. Mother and daughter fret through the dark hours. At daybreak Len is spotted miles down the coast clinging to rocks. The coastguard deem the precious boat unsalvageable. It soon sinks. Len of course is afflicted with exposure, spends days in hospital. They say he clung to his craft all night believing he could save it, and was never certain if his family had made it to shore.

The effect of this episode is curious. The family, far from pulling close in adversity, seem to somehow nurse their singular suspicions, of life's iniquity or malice or uncertainty or darkness or something, and the atmosphere between them in time turns cool, tentative, escapist. None is able to cast the lifebuoy of solace. And Len is not a man to admit to failure, but takes the burden of guilt and gloom on himself nonetheless. Does he have the wit to understand why he brought his family onto the sea? If a man puts a wife and child in a boat, puts his precious things in a single boat and makes it seem a life raft at the mercy of the ragging sea, what does he want? To confront the spectre of failure? For if we endure peril in our boat of shared experience perhaps we'll stay together: but *you, you* must first be imperilled so you may know how *I* am imperilled! For I am a victim. Only in this way can the strange *anima* be faced. Len wouldn't know any of that though. The man dumps his need on his wife and daughter, and they are never equipped to cope. What is his need? Perhaps it is to surrender to the sea.'

### **The Sea**

Blank writes: 'The Shastri spoke of a life in which Marsha's six-times-great ancestor was a captain of merchant ships and roamed the planet's oceans. And I myself went with him for a time in that life, fleeing a marriage imposed on me by my own demanding father. Why should an ancestor of Marsha

matter to me? The astrologer surely urges me to help a present-day woman in need. But the Marsha of that time was not a woman but a man. She was the Captain.

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 his 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... Our ancestor 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 it was the economic strivings of others that let him float almost poetically on the postponements and avoidances of his life - though life at sea is not easy, and he well knew 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.'

I, the ancestor, tell it 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'm 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.

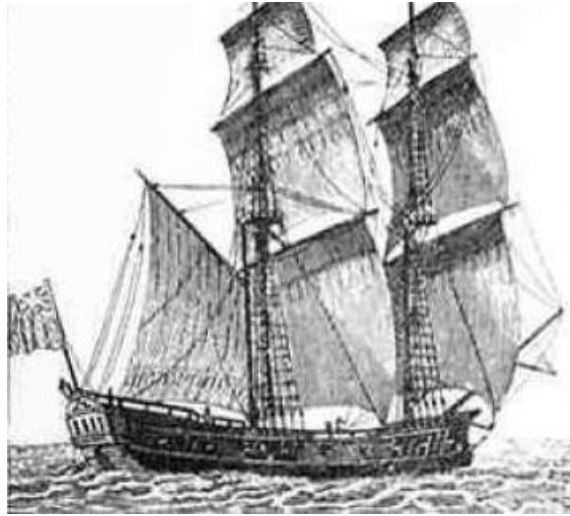
- It is true that I had a girl in England. And I had a child. And that I left them there in that town by the sea to fend for themselves. I went away over the sea. I tell myself it's destiny but I regret it. Now my ship is gone, and I expect you sir, like the rest of the human race to let me alone with my unfurnished guilt. That is, if you survive. Good luck to you, seaman...

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 Marsha, 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 River that Bleeds to the Sea**

In a dusty library in Mexico City, the traveller Blank came across a book in which was a story (from the Spanish-speaking world) of a girl who left her mountain village and descended to the great city on the plain. Her exit was cloaked and sudden so that people asked why a whispered-about (and feared) young woman of the village should run off to the metropolis. In a place where everyone sniffed your business from birth to end, this girl, called notorious for untouchable pride, will have demanded some destiny beyond kitchen, shadowed alley or incestuous plaza, compassed by miles of terrain only goats have a heart to call home. Rugged land of grit and wind and dirt and stone, sufficient to breed in generations an absoluteness peculiar to the indigenous heart; and the girl would chant to stones that no man could love her, sing to the river that leapt and mouthed in gaping ravines. She tortured dewy-eyed boys or grizzled ones who thought themselves men, who cornered her behind the church or by shifty chance at the swim-hole under cliffs or in the shadows of the grocer's where she deigned to give sulky help during the days. Why wouldn't she dream of a wider life... though if no *man* might offer it, what on earth could she be seeking? Without warning early one Sunday, locals said, she disappeared down the sloping goat track to the plain, watched only by a child who gawked at the frilled black skirt, laced bodice and unruly heavy hair flung back, as if a river of stars trailing a cruelly determined empress of poverty.

It is supposed she found her way to the city by foot and cart and helpful motor car. It can be imagined how once within the skirts of the mother capital and arriving at its centre, humanity's streams burst on her, and mute strangers pressed at her, all eyes reckoning what they could take from her... and who will have made her wonder suddenly what she was, her proud loveliness gripped by loneliness of a different kind: not of a girl who kite-like scanned ungiving skies above the bare hills of her home, but

of a creeping chill amid crowds. And it may have come to her that home would never again welcome her, and the hope by which she came (there is one hope only, that of love) is a curse that insults even as it grips at her. It takes no feat of imagining to see how she gapes at facades where dwell the masterful and rich, and discovering herself gawping nearly crosses herself before hurrying on... to the gut of the town, to where girls like her have always gone as if on fleet invisible heels, to the low alleys and cobbled neighbourhoods... and suddenly wondering at how she might have come to invoke the Christian Lord since all her life she held him in contempt, and visioning the little church where she was made to kneel and pray with her family, none of whom (she now sees) felt they ever could confide in her. For what's God but a stern and distant father in a lowering sky, a god who judges this clinging to her skin and her contempt, which brusquely turns now to a sudden operatic curdling of hope. Who will rescue? Her saviour is heralded as sure as night descends, in the form of a *man*. What other creature has eyes for a mountain-sacrificed Inca maiden but wolf males leering from crevices of the city, from moon-fleeced windows above generationed corridors of longing who leer at the insult of her beauty and pride like fateful birds circling a sweet corpse. A tiny hotel beckons like a stable in the wilderness, its red sign coaxing. Into the patio she steps (which is like the lap of a woman once pretty but now so only by lamps and night-imagining) and no sooner is she in the hall waiting for her room than a man is there, leaning by the wall, in low hat and darkish suit and smiling in some deep-practised way that seems novel to her. His cruel-kind eyes loom as she hastens with key up the stairs! How sensing is his mouth, in perpetual half-smile as if all were known before it happens, as if he already regrets the conquest her fleshed fullness offers. Such a man seeks nothing but for his use, cares for nothing as if he possessed it all... which of course vanishes, and thus he is vulnerable in emptiness, needy in cynicism, jaded in his manly silken diffidence! In her cage above, before she even falls to noticing its poverty and insult, a creeping heat seeps into her lower region as if she stood with snatched-up skirt over a desert fire, letting its tongue lick up at her. She slips down her undergarment, stands legs apart in the room and guides her fingers to the place, and gapes her mouth in unbridled strange need until a river of bliss and death shoots into her eyes... Surprised, she tries to cool off with water from a jug and bowl, before dropping to the cringing bed and asking herself how she came to be here in this place. Later, there's a soft knock at the door to which she makes no reply. Her caller, unsurprised, steps lightly away.

Two days pass before a new stair encounter, in which the slung-hatted man invites her to drink in a bar of her choice. One modest hour they sit in shadows at a mosaic table under fronds, she this time in bare-armed flounced dress and strapped shoes that mark her as prey, a challenge but eminently conquerable. His words are as sparse as the coins in her purse, and although he buys her drinks she quickly sees how the city will steal away her tiny fortune. He utters little and promises much, and though she may take herself off, sashay away, the open hills and skies of her eyes have shrunk like a night-promise in a lewd dawn, a girl's dream come to sudden age, or a swollen member whose

erection is finished - and there's no place for her to go. No conquest of a city comes without the opening of its gates, and our maid of the mountains in her curt haughtiness can't compete with the sweet-oil sophistication of practised men, that girls of villages may sense but never grasp. The bullring closes in the noonday sun, a slow circling begun. Her red skirt is a cape, he the matador, his hand the maestro's wand. She's drunk too many drinks but stands up nonetheless, native courage buoyed by liquor. Who can own me! (she tells him) whose sole friend is the cold hill wind, whose heart is as solitary stones in a gurgling river? She swishes down the lane, and he watches and says nothing.

That night in her cave she hears the knock: and she has cooled and oiled and bathed herself already, especially in secret places. Why so? This time the knock persists, soft hammer of bone on wood. At last she opens to a form in the glimmer light. A dripping pause. Have you eaten? I've had no food, she says. Have you money? I'll not answer, she replies. I'll help you, give you all you need. He is inside, the door is shut. His hands touch her lightly... and moonlight floods her window pane. And here arises the mystery. She'll half-swallow her loneliness, half-suppress hatred at the preying of men, wonder if this one is different, gag to know, and know there's only one way to know. But who gets to enter the sanctuary only *she* may violate in fingery haste and want, in contempt at her own loathing of love attached to a nameless face or hand: in sum, to enter her loneliness? Now his automatic manliness bludgeons in, no time for confession or tenderness. Gripping her shoulders, forcing her to the bed under the window pane, he murmurs into her mouth. There's heat, irreparably deep, and she spreadeagles and receives him. And he is hard as bone, as steel. I could love you, he tells. He has his hands about her neck. You like it, you like it! But now she struggles under. Shooting pain tells her she won't ever, can't ever believe! His elbow cracks the window pane. And with his breath and body crushing, she pushes her fist into the pane and gripples at a shard and she stabs him in the low of his back - again and again and again and again - stabs so deep and so deep that rivulets of blood ooze over her hands and into the sheets under the rucked moon... till his bear-breath weight is stilled and stoppered. She pushes him aside: he crashes to the floor. And on the wilderness bed she's filleted, breathless, alone. And now the pain is racking... She sees her hand, like a brilliantined carpet in the yellow light. For a time she lies there. At last she raises herself. He's sleeping on the rug below: his shoulder is twisted under, his genitals are splayed like rubber parts. She looks and looks. At last she dips her hand in the blessed water bowl and waits for it to curdle red. At last she takes a stocking, wraps her stigma wound.

Later she puts on a seemly dress of white. A woman (she says) is no coathanger for a man. She walks in streets by bright cafés. The rich or needy watch her, watch the painted searching eyes. At dawn-break she stumbles upon the river of the city. She gazes long at the water... and numbly she sees... this bloated sewer was once my freckled stream, was tears from the mountain above my village, and



they flowed through black ravines to the waterhole I bathed in, descended to the plains, searched for the sea.

On the evening of the next day the body of a girl in a white sodden dress and estuary of hair is found downriver at a beach where eddies touch at green-slimed stones under rock walls. She is found by a child, and authorities are alerted. A suicide then. Any cause? Somehow the death is reported in a newspaper, perhaps in light of a late murder in the slums. And the tale filters back at last to her village... Presumably someone saw fit to write it and put it in a collection. And that is how I, Blank, came to know of it. How it ended up in a dusty library, fell into my hands and was eaten by my eyes... is a mystery but not an accident.

### **Heart of Hearts**

We begin to see how ancestors, other wanderers, appear in the writer's thought-vignettes: occult émigrés to whom alluring events happened long ago, in pursuit of whose shadowy selves he has no trouble submersing himself, and whom he is subtle or brazen enough to use as substitutes for himself and significant others. For what is the borderland between the real and the imagined? Answer: if we are to unlock the problem of *responsibility*, by grasping the effect of former selves, we must first bring them to light in imagination.

Dear Marsha, (Blank writes) the Shastri told of a significant ancestor of mine who in the earlier part of the nineteenth century seems to have undertaken the European Grand Tour. Such tours were fashionable, even *de rigueur*, ostensibly as educative but also a euphemism for flight from undigested events, the nature of which serve to sharpen a pressing dichotomy in one's life. Thus I visualise the ancestor, how he might amuse himself in recording the weather, judging people and standards in Establishments, sitting alone in the piazzas of strange towns and making notes with punctilious Poirrot-esque peccadillo on sundry things, perhaps even recording the odd lightly disturbing dream. A note taker, yes. 'Still, to delve too deeply into life would be a mistake. It must be said one is not romantic but a bourgeois. One believes not in rocking boats but in proportion, in avoidance of scandal. As for brave-wild wandering, one is hardly the fabled Lord Byron or Percy Shelley, enticing as it may be to know such gentlemen'. Aha, I see I have merged in him already... but my daydream is short! Shastri in his matter-of-fact Indian lilt notes that my ancestor was '*a criminal... though not an evil man*'. Shastri amusingly deals out facts, never judges. Why would he? That soul is but a rotted dream of yesteryear while one is sadly the present carrier of his fleas. The more you learn from the Shastri the more you suspect that people's little evils are less than significant, that we inhabit the same boats, that life is the teacher and arbiter and that since one is a *forever* player in the mortal frame, none escape the correction and balancing of destiny. If only people knew it! This makes for compassion on one hand and irony on the other. Still, compassion and irony don't excuse the truth that we must learn

from absurd transgressions. And Shastri wouldn't offer *Akashic* detail unless the ancestor were significant. I enquire further. It appears he was an Englishman of the middle class, and on the run from a situation 'involving pregnancy'. The astrologer also mentions blackmail. It seems the woman in question had another lover who quite likely made her 'with child'. Our ancestor seeks revenge for being abandoned in a promise of marriage, claiming this (wealthy) woman has damaged his reputation. It seems certain she was promiscuous, with several irons in the fire and now a bun in the oven (which ironises her insufferable diatribes in support of the status of women) while our ancestor sets his face to finding the other lover and extorting money from him! Perhaps he thought this act would restore his pride. Or perhaps he thought he could win her heart by punishing the rival. Alas, he knows nothing of women. In truth the extortion proved relatively easy, and he now suspects his paramour may have been behind the payment. Hush money then! At any rate a cooling-off period is necessary, preferably in southern lands. And his consternation at being parted from his paramour is tempered somewhat by the idea that he himself has been bought off, which in turn clouds his self-satisfaction at being well in pocket. Still, the woman deserved it all, damn it! Yet can there really be satisfaction in money or the winning of gender wars? Perhaps there is a greater thing - a kind of *true romance* - wider, subtler, better - that might restore self-respect beyond slavish pursuit of pride and reputation? Thus the hints are given and the story shall be imagined and told.

One fine day our ancestor (we shall call him Grantham) finds himself in the Eternal City. On an impulse he heads for the Vatican. Once there he begins to experience a strange dislocation, and it is perhaps the awesome immodest scale of the place with its white-gold vaults bedecked with angels, that makes him dimly discover for the first time in his life an impulsion to *pray*. The feeling is disturbing yet strangely compelling. Pray for what? Perhaps it really bodes no good at all. Or perhaps (horror of horrors) it answers a kind of loneliness? On an impulse he purchases an English pocket bible from a tourist stand by the entrance. Later, travelling north toward Genoa Grantham finds himself at the seaside town of Viareggio. It is really rather uncomfortably warm, so that after settling at his lodgings and dressing in the appropriate manner he makes his way to the parlour of the hotel for refreshment prior to inspecting the promenade and the beach, as is *de rigueur* for visitors. He notes the date: July 7, 1822.

In the hotel bar is an aristocratic-looking Englishman of 'bohemian' appearance, rather striking with curled hair and a pleasing mouth, who is loudly entertaining a coterie of rowdies. Grantham has no intention of greeting them. Also present is an enigmatic woman in black whose husband it appears is a poet who has gone sailing and left her in the company of his semi-nefarious friends. She does not appear to be too vexed, especially when the aristocrat launches into a ghoulish story about semi-human monsters, a subject one would deem not fit for ladies.

- So, friends, the *monster*, the daemon within, is feared and shunned by all god-fearing burghers, squatting on their commodes of inertia, loathing its upsurging Promethean spirit! And why should they chastise, if it strews its poison on the world without moral compass? It is *reality*, and it is *ours*.

Grantham cannot but hear all, though while he sits at a corner table with his vermouth and water reminding himself it is a discipline not to associate with fellow countrymen abroad, he in the process neglects to remember the reason: he is in fact an *extortionist*. Thankfully the parlour party adheres to no squeamish principle. They extort truth.

- I say! Fellow! (calls out one) You look to me like a plodding Englishman! Tell us, have you a wife? 'Cause if you did, by the free law of nature you'd be required to 'ave a string of mistresses!

- Hunt, let him be, says the woman in black.

- Where you from? says Hunt.

- From London, sir

- Lunnun! Why's he's down 'ere in the dirty south? Hiding out eh! 'There once was a lady called Claire, who though not partic'larly fair, ne'theless should be *climbed*, and I'm damned if it's *rhymed* - 'but we don't say old *Hunt* chases C -

- *Not* a decent rhyme to be had! butts in a fellow with a gorgeous long moustache. The enigmatic woman rolls her eyes.

- How 'bout Clair-*munt*? says Hunt. - Missy Clairmont chased Lord B. round four countries

- Our Mary here doesn't care to hear! She'll clip you round the ear, have no fear

- Crappy little rhyme, Trelawny. Out of our depth, are we? Lucky Percy's not 'ere to 'ear it. He twizzles the fellow's ear. There's a scuffle and wine is poured over Hunt's head.

- Friends, says the aristocrat with a smile, don't embarrass us in the presence of a well-bred *Inglese*. Tell your name, sir

- Grantham. Charles

- Byron. Lord. (He extends a jewelled hand). This unfortunately is Leigh Hunt, this Trelawny, this our darling Mary Shelley, and our missing member, if madam will excuse the pun, is Percy Bitch her husband, who as we speak is on a yacht he has not the faintest ability to sail

- Since it resembles a coal barge, says Mary in grave tone.

- One named it *Don Juan*, but the fellow seems to want it to fly, since he re-named it *Ariel*

- 'E *don wahn* to hear from *Don Juan*, signor. Eez too chaste. Unlike your *Clairmont*

- Leigh! My *stepsister* is not here to defend herself. Be fair. Love has its cost

- Madam, love is free. Always was, t'will always be. (This from Trelawny)

- Naïve! What's the cost of a brat stowed in a convent? Who never made it out 'cept in a coffin. And what of a second little monster, two months premature?

Byron's pretty face darkens at Hunt's new outrage. What a loudmouth, Charles thinks.

- Desist, Hunt! (Trelawny looks like he can handle himself) *Bysshe* is not bothered to defend his honour, nor are any of us, and Mary has no need. One is an ethicless scribbler, a noisome *scandaliste*

- A scandalist who prints the quotes of mistress *Clairmount*: ‘Byron and Shelley, ‘first two poets of England’ ... monsters of lying, meanness, cruelty, treachery... worshippers of free love who prey not just on one another but on themselves’

- Speak of monsters! Who’s our leading amoral inventor of gothic ghouls?

(Mary) - Alas my lord, *Frankenstein* is horrifically unclean, even beyond a woman’s need

(Byron) - Are *you* a reader or poet, sir? Englishmen are better as soldiers. Or assassins rather. Have you read ‘*Wellington, Best of the Cut-throats*’? ‘*Castlereagh, Intellectual Eunuch*’? The English are thieves as well, *Lord Elgin* chief among ‘em. One loathes hypocrites

- Just ‘cause Byro fondled his sister too much. Too bad.

Charles has no idea what to say. Trelawny pours him a drink.

- So do tell, what murky past d’ you flee from?

- None

- Rubbish! Everyone has a past, else they’re not alive. Drink, man.

So Charles does, then has another followed by another. The talk swirls from Greece to Pisa to Rome to the Church to prayer. And to women and their demands. Charles is not certain what he’s saying since he is unused to heavy Italian liquor. A *confessione* seems to be in train. How so? Is it the strange pull of foreignness? His tale of ‘*my woman with a secret lover who got her with child, and my demand for redress for abandonment in promise of marriage, and her promiscuous hypocritic irons in the fire and bun in the oven despite her insufferable diatribes on the rights of women, and my determination to chastise the rival with vainglorious attempts to win her heart...* momentarily transfixes our tribe of *bohemes* in the bar, and though Charles dodges the bit about *blackmail and extortion* - yet the quick-witted and scandalous Hunt has guessed at it! And now it’s too late to turn back, and though Mary’s subtle eyes say *Best to stop there, my friend*, Trelawny slaps his back and the men laugh and cheer at the world’s extraordinary iniquity and the capacity of a proper little Englishman *to do such a dirty deed*. And he is raised on their alcoholic pedestal as if a ten-minute hero, one part brave, three parts happy idiot, sailing on waves of glad relief, buoyed from drowning by the merry and cynic company. And for a wee moment he is induced to feel like a free poet, man of intellectual vigour, *bohemian*. He forgets that those who delight in others’ scandals usually fail to own their own. But who cares? It’s all entertainment.

- Speaking of villains, Grantham! (Byron says) Our sailor boy Percy Bysshe is the best of us! Not that we compete. Poet-revolutionary, lover of dirty menages, abandoner of wife and desultory children, vegetarian (ugh), atheist! obsessive, gossip, daredevil, self-prophet, odesmith for the *west wind* all

rolled in a bundle. No sailor though. Won't even learn to swim eh Mary? Unlike me, who am prodigiously athletic

- Byro's got a club foot, Grantham
- Hunt! You're a *cunt* - if we're rhyming
- Call a spade a spade, m' lord
- You've a common mind! As for honesty, I know too well the impossibility of living, yet I continue, a true hero. What shit do we bohemians run from? Our romance is for the deep, the far-flung: we seek *a sea-change to something rich and strange*, not of the common run, a thing that's impossible. We obliterate the quotidian foolery of living, we've no moral ties to consequence, we challenge the bedrock of social rule, cock a snook at the hallowed and time-honoured and bourgeois and limited, know no allegiance, seek that which explodes all reason, flaunt ourselves in the face of death. But lo, the very act of seeking is an act of stupidity, of gnostic paucity - since are we not entirely *ourselves*? If so, why should we run from ourselves, from the idea of limitation, poverty of spirit, when we are gods who walk the earth? Conversely, since we are gods, why not indulge in utter foolery and destroy the very things we've made? Perhaps we're yet *immature*, and lack the vision that knows the self to be already free
- Yes, but what legacy would one's *huge ego* want to be remembered for? What use life without achievement?
- The whole world knows Trelawny exaggerates his heroisms
- And *vanity thy name is Byron*. At least I entertain
- Good god, Trelawny killed several men! Trelawny sailed the seven seas, fought off Greek brigands with his bare hands. And what use achievement? Die off, forget it all!

The session rolls on till late in the evening, into a zone where Grantham has no idea what shape the world is or should be. He collapses on his bed, dreams for unnamed hours.

Days go by. One morning he meets Mary Shelley on the promenade. She invites him to sit. They gaze at the sea.

- If you think a woman cares about a man's pride, Mister Grantham, you are mistaken.

This statement spreads itself in the morning air. He glances at her. Who or what is she talking about? She has an immovable air, as of a woman who cannot but be trusted.

- Do you refer to your husband? Or to my situation?

She seems distant. - My husband is not here. (pause) The woman for whose sake you have committed a criminal act will neither forgive nor admire you. In fact, she has no thought for you either way

- Perhaps I know it

- Of course you know it. And yet you run from it. Grantham, the worst thing in this world is to be a fool. The next worst is to be heartless. I do not believe you are the second.

But Charles feels himself bristle. - And Byron. He has it worked out? And your husband?

- I didn't say they weren't fools. Or heartless. Perhaps you have an advantage

- What should I do then?

- Give the money away, and to someone who needs it. Clear your conscience. Get rid of your stupid pride.

And at that she turns to Charles and actually smiles. There's a lofty moment. He takes it in, lets himself share in the odour of a higher thing.

- You make me feel more worthy somehow

- Then I've done you a good turn.

She turns and gazes at the sea. Her manner suggests the talk is over. He bids her good-day.

The following day, Trelawny is seen emerging from the surf, where he appears to have athletically immersed himself. Grantham makes to avoid, but Trelawny tackles him.

- Ought to dive in, Grantham! he shouts from a distance.

- I see no good in unnecessary risk. Besides, I've never swum

(He bustles up close) - Then you're an extraordinarily dull fellow! The sea can teach us everything if we let it. I should know, expert sailor that I am. (He grins) Mary tells me you cornered her. Keen on 'er, are we?

- She's a sensible woman

- Unlike all us queer fellows. (He leans close, dripping wet) Listen Charles, if that fucking lunatic Shelley doesn't turn up in the next day or two I'm going to brain 'im

- Ah. I see you are more than loyal to Mary

- Ooh, too clever, Grantham. I at least have a modicum of sense, and loyalty. To life, that is. Did you hear all that snot Byron was talking?

(Charles wants to be contrary) - Actually, it was quite exciting

- Listen. When the romantic hoo-ha's all said and done, life goes on. And it ain't too pretty

- The dull and sinless inherit the earth, you mean

- Ah, Grantham. You indulge irony now. You're improving

- You don't know me at all

- Oh but I do. I've seen your type all my life. And you're *always* on the receiving end. (Trelawny pokes him) Don't worry, old chap. Always room to improve!

Trelawny claps Charles on the shoulder and strides off down the beach. Charles watches. The sand is rather too deep for striding. The man's long hair sways in the wind. And he glances too often at the sea.

The following day, Charles wakes at dawn and on a restless impulse decides to walk out. It is calm. Soon, on a deserted stretch of strand, he notes from afar a strange-looking log by the waterline. On arrival, he recognises it as a human body. The clothing is raggedly sodden and the face and hands whitely emaciated, almost stripped of skin. The effect is rather shocking. On the quiet dawn shore Charles communes with the strange experience of finding a dead man. It is minutes before he sets out for help. There is no-one near about. He reaches the village and decides to knock up Trelawny; no doubt he'll know what to do. But the man standing in his doorway in his nightshirt seems to turn white on hearing Charles' news. Still, he wakes the hotel proprietor and the three of them hasten in a cart down a track that skirts the beach. Trelawny is uncharacteristically silent, and on reaching the body which sways a little in the seeding surf, he peers close then lets out a dark grunt of recognition. *Shelley!* he mutters.

The rest of the day is crammed with odd things. Charles can barely keep up. Trelawny goes to seek out Mary Shelley and Hunt and Byron. Apparently there's an evil scene when Mary demands to go to the place and Trelawny tells her she must not. The commotion succeeds in waking the building. Charles and the proprietor go to the police meanwhile, and it is some time before an officer of the law inspects the body and loads it in a cart and conveys it to the station. Byron is summoned and asked to tell the officer all he knows. But it is Charles who intercedes when Byron starts uttering what to the official mind are irrelevancies suited more to poetic and moral empyreans than the discharge of mundane and melancholy duty, none of it helped by the need to speak in both Italian and English where Byron is the only bi-lingualist present. The officer therefore assumes Charles to be in command and asks him to sign witness forms and write salient facts extracted with effort from the histrionic lord. These revolve around the sailing of the deceased with two other men on the Genoa-registered *Don Juan* from Leghorn to Lerici, and the expectation that the vessel would be in port days ago. This elicits from the mouth of the inspector a surly Italianate remark to the effect that *that sudden storm a week ago must have put paid to the lot of 'em*, by which Charles is required to step in and shield the irate Byron from this wall of matter-of-factness. Nor is the policeman slow to inform the pair that 'proper arrangements' must be made for immediate cremation according to quarantine law. This promotes a storm of protest from the vociferously fevered lord who claims to stand for simple justice and compassion in lieu of the dead man's poor wife who is unable to attend the depressing scene, etcetera. But Charles hastens to his apartment, locates a sum of money from a cubby hole where he stashed it, brings it to the official and pays out then and there all projected costs for placement of forms and delivery of the body to the hands of a funeral director, to whom Charles is now directed.

Byron has meanwhile decamped. Charles pays the director on the spot for wood, urn for ashes, hire of a priest and sundry mundanities. He manages to convey in broken Italian the police-required cremation spot and that the ceremony is to be carried out before sunset that very day. Charles is assured by the director that Italians are perfectly aware of how to carry out correct regulations and ceremonies, and feeling increasingly like meat in a thick byzantine sandwich, now seeks out Hunt and Trelawny at the hotel. Suffice to say the scene in Mary's room is chaotic, with Byron insisting on clinging to Mary as if to the wreck of the *Hesperus*. To Charles he seems to need to be at the centre whatever the circumstance. At this moment his talk seems to be all about Shelley's *heart* - how it is *unique* and must be *claimed and preserved*. This to Charles seems downright bizarre. He and Trelawny repair to the corridor. No doubt (complains Trelawny) Hunt will be writing all this up for readers of his precious London magazine! He clumps down the stairs. Hunt for his part comes out and whispers to Charles (who seems to be the only one these people are able to talk to): - I am apprised of the grim irony of this tragedy in two ways, Grantham. That Shelley is now but a corpse and no longer a transcendent poet, and second, because he *refused* to learn to swim or sail he almost dared himself to turn victim to the rage of the sea. This reflects badly, does it not, on the regard or lack of it he might have for his wife and sundry scattered-about offspring. I can already hear the talk in London when the news breaks! *Shelley, great iconoclast and atheist, now shall know whether there be God or no!* Decidedly the man had no respect for life. Such is romance, a fleeced corpse of skin and bone! Did you see it, by the way? (Charles affirms he did) So is it actually Shelley? A metaphysic moot point. Ask the wife what she thinks!' And Hunt repairs to the bar downstairs, pulling Charles with him. He demands a bottle and pours a line of pick-me-ups down his throat. Trelawny is already mournfully doing the same. Since no-one saw fit to focus on practicalities in dealing with the body, they react with surprise when Charles informs them he has made and paid for all arrangements. No-one offers to reimburse; instead they drink and nurse egoic sorrows.

Cremation is to be done that evening at six. Terribly sudden, Charles observes. He has the inspiration to pocket the English bible he purchased in Rome. On the beach, the body of Shelley is laid out atop a pile of faggots. The police official, funeral director and local priest stand by. Soon a carriage bumps along the track. Inside are Mary Shelley and her undying friend Lord Byron. He steps out, hurries to Charles and says: Grantham, listen. We need to get his heart. Go and find a knife - a butcher or something - and after he's burned, cut it out and keep it for Mary. Charles blinks, but Byron says *hurry, man!* and pushes him in the direction of the village. Charles stops, pulls out his English bible. *You may need this*. Byron snatches it. *That can go on the flames as well!* In fifteen minutes Charles is back at the beach. The mustachioed and beetle-browed Italian butcher who gave him the blade (for a fee) said to him darkly: *seek amore, not morte, signor*. At that, Charles felt no further need to react to anything. The little group is standing about. Byron is speaking, the bible discarded at his feet. No-one seems to be listening. The flames are catching. Trelawny and Hunt stare upward at the sky. Mary is



kneeling in the sand at a distance. Smoke rises in the languid air, and at moments a zephyr catches it, thrusts it into the watchers' faces. They avert their cheeks. The emaciated form on the pile, with white rictus grin and boned feet that was Percy Shelley seems to diminish by degrees in the flame. It is certain his soul has long departed, or perhaps it circles above the scene like a seagull in blue dark air, watching these specks on the beach do their turgid stiff mournful rite over his disdained body... The flames rise suddenly. Dark smoke gushes up. Byron recites in plaintive voice. The priest gives a benediction. The group stands frozen... At last all begin to disperse. The carriage totters off. Charles speaks words in the ear of the director, who to his surprise takes the knife, deftly extracts a shrivelled thing from the ruins of ash, wraps it in a cloth and hands it to him.



The next day, Charles Grantham goes to Mary Shelley's apartment to pay his respects. Takes the 'heart' in a little box, presents it. She looks at him wordlessly. *Heart of Hearts, Cor Cordium*, he finds himself whispering. And it seems appropriate. Next he takes out a wallet thick with banknotes and hands it to her. This is all I have, he says. He swiftly exits the room, reaches the beach, stands there searching at the steel-grey sea. Presently there comes to him a new feeling. He recognises it as peace.



### **The Transference**

Blank writes: ‘Marsha, I have a deeply intimate story for you. The Shastri said there is reason to believe one of my ancestors and one of yours were connected, by ‘intimate necessity’, that your twice-great grandmother underwent treatment in Switzerland with a psychologist later linked to Freud’s circle. Their conversations are recorded, and I gained access to them by means of requests drafted on your behalf. I even had parts translated. We may discern that the patient (let’s call her Marta Pappen) underwent severe difficulties following the decline and death of her father. How should descendants like us treat such information? I find it illuminating, the extraordinary defensive tricks ego resorts to in dealing with unswallowed energy.

*Analyst’s Log, June first, 1882:* It is significant that Marta Pappen is prone to dumping unresolved or rejected material on her analyst. This is known as transference, where she turns him into a surrogate object of her need, and where love and animosity mask each other. What value has her experience in the world unless accepted by a significant other? Do we exist ‘in and as ourselves’? In her case, it is the deceased father and the analyst wherein cause and cure are entwined. Classic practice bids the analyst deflect the transference at any cost, but since it occurs to me that a countertransference is inevitable, the very relationship between us may become the fertile ground. If, rather than distancing himself from his emotive reactions, the analyst monitors them in relation to the transference, therein will be his key to grasping the substance of it. I shall do well to rigorously note my attendant emotions, ensuring a gateway to the patient’s own. With a proviso: that she be honest! How to ensure honesty, both in relation to ‘me as bogeyman’ and her wish to avoid the real depths of her neurosis? First, transference is the *unconscious* projection of need, and provided she has resolved to engage fully with me, it is no more avoidable than circulation or heartbeat or breath. Second, if one can induce her to talk of feelings in a milieu of openness, then our transferences may constitute the very soul of intimacy. Of course I won’t publish results, and not for the likelihood that I’ll be struck off the

psychoanalytic register. While one feels a sense of duty to the cause of professional *respectability*, where modern analysts are forced into ‘objectivities’ that distance them from their human subjects, I proclaim it to be *the qualities of the curer alone* that may expedite a cure. Humility must be chief among them, and openness to all things: in short, willingness to risk the hell-ride of countertransference for the sake of knowing the ultimate origin of the transference. Here then is our intimate dance, where split-off parts of each other’s psyches come to a clinch from which we may not disengage before a bitter or happy ending! But *honesty*: here is our problem, since multi-headed demons masked in subterfuge arise. Analysis submits to no guide but *order*, whereas ego succumbs to the unruly unconscious, so that bad conscience dumps its material on the analyst. How shall he respond? With commensurate force, leading to a ‘free for all’ that teeters on the cusp of mutual madness? We may for the sake of science think to tread a razor’s edge between anarchy on one hand and rules-based analysis on the other. But who can cope with such a path? I admit *I* cannot, for the reason that I must observe a process, seek profounder outcomes, hope for a patient’s cure. And what is cure but the cessation of transference, a sign of which is the proper regulation of her need in relation to the cause and symptoms of the psychosis? What is the cause? Clearly the failure to assimilate a tragic event. When a father passes, the child may lose her sense of being, sense of worth. No pathway is yet established to replace the parental context. Meanwhile there is but an abyss of loss. I suspect the pit of mourning has turned to hatred of mourning itself, hatred of the need to transcend a (possibly unreal) relationship with the father and move on toward independence. Hence the replacement of father with analyst. To be observant is to glean the content of this father relationship. Surely there is clinging love, but also anger at his demise, and loneliness played out as hatred in the guise of *jilted lover*. From this egoistic rebellion comes guilt, which seeks self-harm, which in turn is sublimated as martyrdom! Small wonder she needs to replace her lover with another, even to replace father with a *child* for which the analyst is accused of being the source! But I run ahead of myself, and should readers allege that a female patient has somehow been subsumed to confinement in my interpretive journal, that she appears as it were *through a glass darkly*, then I challenge them to otherwise make sense of the avalanche of symptoms hurled at me by a demanding and resourceful patient in the grip of a dissembling unconscious!

*June tenth, 1882*: On Sunday last, Hans Pappen invited me for an outing on Lake Maggiore. I had previously felt constrained as a favoured acquaintance of the family to confine myself to offering solace in their bereavement. Yet following Hans’ repeated requests in relation to his young wife, after some hesitation I took it upon myself to engage with the pathology of Marta Pappen. I have to say it proved tricky to convince my own wife that I should undertake a ‘pleasure trip’ on Lake Maggiore without her. And perhaps one hesitated to speak of the embarrassing sprites that possess the girl in question. Picture then a sunny late morning in June, our sturdy little cruiser gliding away from the Locarno dock by light breeze in the direction of Ascona, under the serene gaze of the mountains.

Present on the vessel are Hans, Agnes the mother, Marta and myself. The girl is ensconced in the centre, in a green and white striped dress with parasol, and smiling enigmatically. Drinks are served by Agnes in stiff ceremonial fashion, and Hans steers us with bluff and assuring mien over blue-oil undulant waters. Marta is all propriety at first, but soon the little sprites begin to show their teeth.

- I and my family thank you for our little *tete a tetes* these last weeks, mister analyst
- Marta, kindly address our guest as *Doctor*
- But mother, we are close. D'you know what goes on behind closed doors in our doctor's cubby hole?

Agnes smooths the folds of her grey-black dress. Hans resolutely scans wider waters.

- There's a view, *herr Doktor*, that excessive social constraint is the true cause of *hysteria*. No cure unless we substitute a vision of *unconfinement*. D'you know what I know about Ascona over there, herr Doktor? It's a place where *bohemians* gather. Mummy doesn't like the word bohemian. It invites sexual licence and other evils. I know a doctor who practises it on his patients! At the sanatorium too. Hans? Turn the nose for the sanatorium!

- Not today, my dear
- Husband, don't be cruel! One doctor-daddy can't cure me. I have doctors all about!
- Marta, if you are determined to upset the outing, we will turn -
- The boat about? Can we turn about the boat of the *soul*, mummy?
- (Time to step in) - Marta, we intend to offer all the attention you need
- I *eat* attention. Little attention grabber. Mummy knows. Daddy knew better
- Remember I said the ego resorts to extraordinary tricks to deal with unswallowed energy?
- Otto says it displaces and projects!
- Among other things. Who is Otto?
- Otto Groot from *Ascona*. He's the clever side of you, Doktorr. An anarchist
- Invite him on our boat then (Hans is determined to be bulletproof)
- I did, husband. And you wasn't there. 'E's a properr sayler, see. I nearly felled in an' he pulled me back. The lake is *deep*, Doctor. I so wanted to gargle with the fishes
- (Agnes) - The boat trip is fantasy
- Don't ask her! She needs to keep the lie in the family. Mummy, who uses mannish stoicism to hold it all in. Won't even let herself cry! Upsetting is what we need, for women are pitiful creatures. D'you know, Doctor, I've adopted lesbian status as a tribute to daddy
- Marta plays the child since no-one humours her, doctor
- Why as a tribute to your father?
- 'Cause no man can replace him! Sit *here* so I can whisper. (I do) Now, back to my near-drowning in the lake. Suicide's the perfect exit, shortcut to heaven, punishment on the world. Doc Otto said I'm brave

- He wants you dead then?
- He wants me brave and strong! But I fail. Perhaps I secretly want to be a notorious *advocate* for women. My lesbians need me. Hans is jealous
- Heard that! Never jealous, doctor
- Should be! My Lulu tips the velvet better than your *dog*
- Marta! (Mother has stood up, but sways uncannily) Take me *home*, Hans
- All right everyone, enough. Peace now!

My injunction seems to work. The family assume statuesque poses, and we flutter on in the austere lake breeze. Here on water though, human boundaries are prone to dissolve. One cannot even be certain that the mother will hold herself aloof... Now a stiffer wind fills the sail. Marta takes to a certain robotic self-talk, flicking glances my way. Hans wants to engage me in talk. We stand at the helm gazing at the peaks. Under a thick-skinned Swiss exterior, I take him as unstuffy. He relates a tale of summer walks in the highlands. 'A fine old time', he asserts, 'before all this *business* - this business of dying and failing and wasting away. And the business of making a fetish out of it! You're getting the sweet girl today. Nearly acceptable behaviour! But wait till the weather turns.' He seems adept at nautical statements. No doubt there is nothing in his masculine cosmos to rival lake and mountain and sky. Marta is drumming her fingers on the gunwhale. Mother stares at her abstractedly. Presently Marta delves into her bag, takes a thing out. Next she slips a hand under her skirt. I feign not to notice. She grimaces... then sits fixedly. Minutes go by. Next Agnes makes a cry. We all turn. There is a little stream of red nosing across the floor of the boat from under the folds of Marta's skirt. *Ugh! Mummy, look. My miscarriage! Help!* Take the wheel! says Hans. He kneels down, lifts the skirt. Blood obscures the legs. Agnes stifles a scream. Take the wheel and turn *about!* shouts Hans. Marta starts to sway and writhe, the craft starts to rock, the jib careens wildly. Hans takes my place, turns into wind. Now Marta faints. I find a handkerchief, push up the skirt, try to staunch the cut which is next to the crotch. Seriously awkward! ...Thirty minutes later we get her onshore, into a carriage and to a local clinic. The injury, I explain to the medic, is the result of an unforeseen maritime incident.

*August, 1882:* The patient Pappen has succeeded in nearly chasing away my other patients. She now attends my clinic twice daily, thrice weekly. I never know which version of the girl will show up, but I discern three personae: the *rationalist*, mournful and apprehensive but nevertheless keen to minutely analyse every jot and tittle of detail; the *anarchist*, whose sole aim is to promote hysteric hallucinatory mayhem; and the *calculator*, whose goal it is to sexually invite then punish: the *femme fatale*, the woman of power. We already met these in nascent form on the boat, and she has assiduously cultivated them all. Since in any of these states she fails to recall a thing from another, we are required to at least posit a case of dissociative identity disorder. The *rationalist* reels off endless unsolicited details, and though it is at times unendurable I encourage talk - including how Marta's father fell ill

during a family holiday, and how one night while sitting at his sickbed she was suddenly tormented by hallucinations of a Black Snake - a horrific state of anxiety. The father died soon after. It was she who insisted on the idea of 'remembering' in which she 'reels off' her symptoms in a list, including a reconstruction of the original night of hallucinations at her father's bedside. She dubs it 'sweeping the path', or 'babbling cure'. But do symptoms really drop away with the uncovering of their unconscious preconditions? The idea that verbalising her problem helps her to unburden (known as catharsis theory) asserts that hysterics suffer mostly from traumatic memories which by being related can be 'processed', whereby one hopes to come to the root. Unfortunately the Anarchist usually pounces, such that 'free association' turns into Marta's means of resistance to *any* form of interpretive conclusion. Anarchist then teams up with Calculator. Some samples:

'How does mein cure hinge on favours bestowed by you, analyst? Dear man, fucking is quite a cure! Tres original! Though my anal-ist may want to scurry away. I on the contrary recommend the sex, as goddam much as possible. And now that I am pregnant with your *child*, you must not meet any other patients or I will fatally ruin your reputation with your wife and your colleagues! *But Marta, who'll believe you?* Oh, there'll be blood. There is blood! *But we've had that episode on the boat, so you'll be crying wolf.* 'Fucking is your reward! I'm not ill, I am a respectable woman. My friends won't hear of such a disgusting thing as insanity. I'll sue you! Your wife will not want to hear what we did together in your dirty room!'

Following on, after much face-twitching and mouthing (treated with chloral or morphine, to which she has developed an addiction) there is no room for the Rationalist. We resort to hypnosis.

*Now Marta, you know the drill. Hypnosis by the usual method. Later, the talking cure. Yes yes, the Heaviness. Will you be Daddy? Certainly. Let your limbs be heavy (long pause). Look, I've arranged the furniture. Father's room. Tell us how you felt back then: suicidal... mad... needy... Daddy, you know I love you since I dump my shit on you. I am always at your sickbed. I smooth your sheet, empty your pot. But I should be the dead one; should be me, should be me. I would go to the still end of eternity for you, but there's a black snake! Big black worm writhing in undergrowth! Rears up at me. Jack in a box. Uuugh! What does this snake mean to you? It means I want you inside my hot cunt, stupid analyst. All right, but maybe you need to confront your hate of men. Your wish to fornicate is your only solution to overcome the hatred. Hatred of you, daddy? Yes, for leaving you bereft. But I'm the martyr who has to lie and cheat to test you, to make you ingenious, pull you out of yourself so you can cure me. Don't you want to cure yourself? No, I cure you! I make you take risks for me. This is my integrity. Filthy psychiatry for sex-liberation! Cannot repress to be socialised. First have to dig up dirt. Why do I reject all my crummy social roles? They're stultifying anathema to me. Get pagan! In my office only, it would seem. Talk some dirty science to me, doc. All right. Your unconfined ego has two parents: the censorer called id, and the noisemaker called superego. Ouch, Doctor Groot talks*

hotter than you. *Go to him then.* No challenge! He takes out his thing and I suck it. Simple, says I. Never got to do it behind the sheds at school. Sweet boy takes me back to the Golden Age: no hierarchy no rules. But I have shallow consciousness called extraversion. I'm manic depressive! Another type called paranoiac is people with introverted consciousness, he said. That's you moo moo. Gets shitty when he hears about you. Not bad analysis for dumbfuck woman eh? Anyway I told Groot I suck him to cure him. *Groot seems to be onto a good thing.* Oooh jealous, doc? Go on, say it! *All right, screw him.* Yay, that's what I do but he's a homo! Does secret homo therapy on *me*. His name's clearly shit in your shrink world. That's where you're going too, doc, 'cause I'll use you more than you'll use me. Why are we such messed-up narcissists? *Anarchic indulgence destroys social responsibility, to husband, to family. I can't help you if I get derailed.* You don't believe your own crap! Sanity's your disguise! You need to get derailed to be any use to me. Why should a woman hide? Fuck modesty, I'm a warrior! Take me seriously, stupid world. Groot does! *He needs to exploit you.* And you don't? Ugh, I'm suffering. Get me a fucking needle, one for you too, or I'll turn you in to the police.

And so forth. Amazing tricks ego gets up to! Here is my current list: *Projection:* Marta and I routinely dump rubbish on each other. *Displacement:* She indulges evil impulses on less threatening targets, ie: me. *Rationalising:* She claims we men flee emotion, substitute 'logical-rational' reasons for real ones. *Sublimation:* Accuses me of acting out unacceptable impulses in 'socially acceptable' ways. *Turning Ascetic:* Excoriates anyone who flouts desire. *Reaction:* Adopts opposite positions on principle. *Regression:* Loves to replay previous stages of development like throwing childish tantrums. *Repression:* Claims to eschew the previous evil, but the jury is out! *Turning against Self:* Indulges inferiority depression guilt. *Splitting Off:* Marta assiduously nurses three substitute personae. *Undoing:* Witness her 'magical' rituals for cancelling ugly thoughts and feelings. *Introjection:* Marta sucks people like Otto Groot into her. *Altruistic Surrender:* Claims to 'sacrifice for atonement' but is not above wanting to cure me! *Identity with Aggressors:* Claims to 'serve' those who want to help her, but these are the people she hates the most.

The reader will smile to see that Marta and I have morphed to a sort of filthy duo. All in all a razor's edge, a hell ride. Faustian risk, sexual risk, risk to profession, risk to integrity. Now I'm faced with shepherding my own wish to exploit, my own inner violence which I deflect as pity, as arrogance, condescension and self-satisfaction at the hell of *her*. Boost to my ego at the expense of a 'loser who should probably die', usury and cruelty for the sake of making myself feel better, countertransference for the sake of 'scientific' voyeurism. Dangerous games all! But what can a man do when she'll not take responsibility for herself? The hysteria is willed! There's a point where the father's death is irrelevant, an excuse for unruly narcissism. Women are unstable anyway, always crying, cajoling, and I am the exploited. *Do it for science!* she shouts. She'll use me till the bitter end. I'm in too deep.

And I *want* it. I want the satisfaction of knowing no-one else can put up with her. Especially not that idiot Groot. But she'll surely condemn me to others as revenge for 'leaving' her. Because I must. She knows it and pushes me to the limit. Perhaps she is my real curer, my dark saint. It would be appropriate if one were Faust, but healing... it is a slow and laborious life journey, not this slimy vortex of hell which seems to have no bottom, this maelstrom that generates itself. Yet at the same time I don't *care*. Unknown reader, you'll be keen to hear that we abused that needle, and yes, she got me on the floor, got her skirts off (she wears no underwear in anticipation) and we did the business. I had to put my hand over her mouth at the coming moment. She duly discharged her slime over my tiles. After such episodes she tends to smile, contented for a while. *I'm cured, doctor*, she whispers. Until (and this is the addictive part for me) she starts to shiver and shake... and she starts again, starts to make her verbal lists, to reel them off... and I have to join the ritual, the ritual of the child. And she talks faster and faster until it is a burble... and then she has to arrange herself and clean up my room, fiddle with everything, set me to rights, fuss with my dress and tie, and we have to wash our hands frantically together, and then she has to sit on the bed and rub her hands and talk talk talk until she's got to the end of the list in her head. And then she makes me mention the *Black Snake*, and on cue she shudders, looks into my eyes and intones solemnly: *Yes yes, doctor, the Snake. But it's all right now. You and me, we have killed it.* Fat chance! A little later come the spasms, the abdominal cramps. This is where she is feeling the baby, where the baby is growing inside. And she has to get me to hold her, to comfort her. And then she seems to be angry with me because I have caused her this distress and pain, and she reminds me that I have ripped away her hopes of liberation, destroyed her womanly options in this hard world (*etc*) and that my wife will certainly be angry, not to mention her own dear faithful husband. And what on earth will she tell her poor mother Agnes, and how will she excuse it in her conscience when she goes to the grave of her *father*, silent and alone, wanting to talk to his spirit? Oh, what an unkind doctor am I! What an evil exploiter! At this point I gently remind her that life is a gift, that a child is a gift, that she should be glad, that she will make a fine mother... and at last Marta Pappen begins to soften and to half-smile again, like a sheepish girl, and at last is ready to go home. I escort her quietly down the path. And one hopes that she will pass a gentle night, sleep the sleep of the innocent. Until tomorrow. Until the pleasure-hell of tomorrow. Because you see, Marta Pappen will never rest. Somehow, on this long and fiendishly complicated cosmic road, she is the mad patient who is determined to cure the doctor.

### **A Question of Stomach**

The Shastri said: 'We should speak of one further scene - of betrayal - in the country of France at the beginning of the Greatest War'. Marsha, I intend to coat with flesh, old bones unearthed by the astrologer. I declare it to be Paris, and the year to be nineteen forty. This story 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.'

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And at last, due to the understandable ignorance a chronicler has at his own pressing karma, my imagination has run out. Shastri 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, 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? Marsha, 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 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 only. Matty won't stomach this episode. Don't show it to her.

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. Marsha? 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 tinkle 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 eyes. 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 circumstance 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 shoved 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 crashing 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. But 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.

And 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.

### **Into the Wild**

From the great beanhill of narratives that can be told, we pluck this one or that one, for reasons we can't recognise till they're told. They grab at our hearts without our knowing why; such stories seem to rise like genies from the unconscious, because it is what we don't know about a story that makes it matter. All the same, I seem to be obsessed with escape stories. Marsha, I think this one is up your alley. One thing about you and my grandmother is: you are not bolters, not *suicides*. I know you sometimes want to run but can't contemplate it because of Matty. (And don't despise or be jealous of me; it's nothing like peaches and roses.) In the state of Ohio I read in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* about a youngish woman with husband and eight-year child who 'took to the highway alone one winter's dawn while her suburb was sleeping'. It seems she was a soldier, a veteran of Afghanistan. Beyond the notes she left - a bitsy diary exposed in small part in the *Dealer* - the chronicler might surmise at third hand that a girl who was once a soldier lost her simple sense of being a girl, and tried to reinvent or find or recalibrate herself... or something, beyond the steely norms of how her country honours (or dishonours) its veterans. (Do women become soldiers to be men, or to destroy them?) And beyond a certain point in time, she was never located again. I don't have all the facts but can't help imagining. I imagine a woman who fled to the wild, fled her life and child. As if gone to war again, in a country ruled by men. I see her walking a frozen plain. Nodding oil derricks specker the dead land; they rape and feed and suck like crows on blood snows - and all around are ragged winter trees, their bones puncturing the sky. And it is all a cosmic *lie*. She sees a scarecrow in a field, and there rises again in her mind the swooping and spluttering of gunships... 'Young like me she was... and she raised her stick-naked arms, and she salivated and cried: America! Sell me your road to release!' Salivated and perished for peace. In her own land. And now I say to You: this is my land - all you Christian soldiers, you soldiers of money, I'm the beggar who pissed in your church! The beggar in the night who rode a highway west. Sleep on, you pampered mortals. There is no shield, no family, no cradle... In the dawn my truckie and I roll into a city. Bloated faces in celluloid hog the avenues. Cities of want crying: *believe in the greedy, the holy crimes of war, the slobbering of a girl...* A girl who was a Soldier. A girl no more. Gone to war with all prediction, contradiction! These threads of steel: let them *heal*. Because I wanna feel... leaves of grass... the other shore... cross this river... silent spring... skin of mist... this crystal morning... kingdom come thy will be done... touch

the void... yellow sun oh warm my face... to be undefiled, undefiled... scatter, scatter what you sow... into the wild, into the wild.

### **Our Little Secret**

Marsha, this tale showed up in my mind after I read a report in a Cheyenne newspaper. Matty might appreciate it.

In a nameless Wyoming town, Martha Haines picks up her daughter Maddy from a soda bar in main street, and though Maddy is half through her iced sundae, she is ushered to the car and driven out of town. The girl notes the fixed expression in her mother's eye and assumes there has been an altercation, a scene maybe, back at the motel. They certainly are not headed there now. Maddy keeps her mouth shut. Miles go by before mother speaks. Her eyes don't leave the road which is now dirt. 'I know you've not seen your friends these last months, and I know it's been a new town every day. But one of these days we'll go home and we'll settle and get you back in school. And we'll be happy again.' It is the summarising tone, and the last sentence, that get Maddy to take dim notice. Mother never talks about happiness. Mother never says anything emotional, not to her. They drive till sunset. Orange-black bands of sky flood the windshield. To Maddy's eyes evening is always the lost time. Always depressing, unless we are in the ungovernable desert. Then she doesn't care. It will get chilly later. She wonders if her clothes are in the trunk. She has a favourite coat, and she'd be loath to lose it. In fact it was *him* who gave it, presented it to her with his crooked smile. Claimed he wore it when he was a kid. He's still a kid. *How long before I forget his face?* This thought comes from nowhere. The radio is on. Mother favours those mournful soupy ballads. Maddy wants to hate them, finds she can't.

*Destiny rides through the badlands  
No surrender to these mad sad sands  
They won't bury me while vultures cry  
Under blood-red sky; while destiny rides.*

Mother says they'll not be going to a motel tonight. Why this is so, Maddy does not ask. There can be three reasons: they've no money, they are lost, or Mother doesn't want to be seen. They park up on a high place near a canyon. Hard deserted lands spread into distance. Martha likes to stop in the high places. Maddy is tempted to exit the car and tip herself over the lip just to see if she can fly. It turns cold. Mother frets her face a little, wraps herself in a poncho, adjusts herself to the hard upright shape she'll sleep in. Hard boots and jeans hug the auto's pedals. Her hair is straggly. It could use some love. Maddy wonders at times how her mother manages to live. Now she stretches out on the back seat, smells the leather at her nostril, studies the dark-silver shape of the door handle. It is an alien thing, but oddly a friend. The wind gets up outside. The dark universe taps at the window pane.

In the morning, rouge-grey light yawns over the badlands. Maddy's mother is standing off by the lip of the canyon. That characteristic cowboy lean, one leg apart, check shirt and curvy rider's backside. Maddy's mouth is dry. She comes up, takes her mother's hand. They gaze out to the horizon.

- Had a bit of a bust-up, him and me, says Martha. He won't be coming to see us any more.
- What? says Maddy though she heard every word.
- There'll be a time when you and me won't be together. But not yet, eh Maddy?
- Okay. But what did he say?
- He said 'say hello to the little lady'.

*I don't keep your picture in my 'saddlebag'  
On these black roads where you can't follow  
Because you lie in our hotel room  
Red, red streams on our pillow.*

And Maddy hears her mother's breath get harsher, sees the eyes rim up with tears. The strong dangling hand pulses with blood. Maddy grips it. There's nothing else she knows how to do.

- Is it like the time daddy went away?
- Something like that.

*You won't taunt me no more  
Ain't no more streams for crying  
I poured them all away, yesterday*

*Through the badlands I set my eyes  
For some Mexico, beyond these lies  
No, you won't bury me where vultures cry  
Under blood-red sky  
Because destiny, because destiny, destiny rides.*

Mother and daughter ride on all that day. Once they stop at a roadhouse and Maddy has a wash and is sent to buy a meal. Momma stays out in the car. Once they stop at a place by a stream with hanging trees. It is a relief from the harshness and dust, where all around them the badlands stretch as far as eyes can see, to black hills in the distance. Momma takes off her clothes and wades into the stream and lays her body down. Maddy sees her try to soothe herself. Her white form rustles in the greening water, her legs splay out and her face turns up to the sky. Maddy squats at the edge with her chin in her hands. Later momma's big white-skinned form rises up out of the water. Maddy gazes at the

special woman's place, where the sex is. This is what her men like best, she thinks. I'd like it too. If I were them.

Mother rinses her hair over the stones, wraps herself in a cloth and comes and sits by Maddy. Everything about momma is kind of dramatic. Like a heroine, Maddy thinks. She feels she has no identity when momma is by her. The trees above the stream rump lazily in the lost sky. Martha begins to talk.

- Do you remember back in Kansas, when daddy first took us there? Maybe only a little, you were so young. Those were good days. I was happy. He used to tell great stories. I knew they were as tall as the trees but I never cared. Did you like them too? And do you remember the summers before daddy went away? Our place by the lake, our summer pool in the lee of the cornfields. A bit like this, wasn't it? We used to laugh. Boy, did we laugh. But I always dreamed of going far away. Because I wanted love. Real love, you see. Turns out *you* are my only love! And I tried to give you a daddy, to keep one just for you. Turns out I never could. None of them are good enough. You might think they are, but none of them are real, not in the end. Oh, they get the whole of me, but they're takers. Daddy got the whole of me, and you're the result. But I dream of things, and I never get them... You'll be strong, won't you sweetheart?

'Now Martha does her usual big big hug of me, and there are tears. Next she goes to the trunk of the car, takes everything out, gets herself dressed. Stuffs a bundle of things in a big bag, puts it next to me. I watch her and say nothing. She reaches into her handbag and pulls out a bundle of paper. I can see it is money. This is where she backs away from the scene. Away from me. I remember how her boots scuff roughly on the rocks. There are tears in her eyes. She gets in her car. She drives away. That's it.

I sit there in the silence and think nothing at all.

Years later I begin to understand. This is the deal we always had. I had to be loyal to my mother.'

...Maddy still has a little ukulele. Momma's last lover gave it to her. The one who didn't make it. Over time she has figured out a chord or two. And one time she returned to the place where she last saw her mother, and as she sat on the edge of a canyon and looked out to the beautiful corrupt badlands of far Dakota, a little song popped out of the sky for her. As if ready made.

*Momma said... momma said*

*Your daddy's lying in the earth for his bed*

*Don't let no policeman turn your head*

*'Cause you're my only, you're my only, momma said.*

*Summer grasses blow*

*Pools of summer in our eyes*

*We drowned in laughter*

*He told us, told us sweet sweet lies.*

*Your daddy's lying, momma said, in the earth for his bed*

*Don't let no policeman turn your head*

*'Cause you're my only, you're my only...*

*Momma said, momma said.*

'Yes. This is our little secret, and only the sky will ever hear it. I guess it is the stuff legends are made of. ...Martha. You were my mother. And I sing for you. Sing for you.'

### **The Fundamentalist**

Here is an ugly-beautiful saga, and a cautionary tale, this time especially for the eyes of Matty.

*The New York Times* reported weeks ago that Lena Last, daughter of the US Ambassador to Jordan, fled her exclusive apartment on Manhattan's East Side on a one-way trip to Amman. She seems to have left nothing but a garbled text message for her mother in that city. Until today. *The Times* is in possession of her diary, which contains elements sure to be of public interest. Writes Candice Shergold: 'Lena Last claims to be dating a critic of our country's policy in Syria, one Tarik Saed, who was this week thrown out of the US on charges of provoking unrest. Ms Last appears to assert that Saed's brother was killed by the Syrian regime, a direct result of US hypocrisy in the middle east... Excerpts from the Koran and Tibetan Book of the Dead may be mere fashion items for a bored sixteen year old, but the inclusion of statements by Patty Hearst, 1970s heiress and terrorist (since pardoned) complicates the story. An example: after apparently seeing her father on Al Jazeera, Last writes: 'More f---ing PR for the elders! Why so hideously ambitious? Let me helpfully add that my mother is a closet alcoholic, and obviously a hypocrite since Jordanian Arabs ban alcohol. Mummy's drinking is a festering sore with my pillar-of-establishment parents. Daddy would kill before he got a stain on his reputation. Relevant in the light of his public denunciation of my *boyfriend*... I see the holy hole at Grnd Zorro (Ground Zero) is an even bigger f---ing monument to money designed by a Jew; huge middle finger to the rights of Arabs everywhere.' *The Times* quotes an FBI source saying operatives failed to arraign the girl at Kennedy airport, and her whereabouts is still unknown. It is now weeks since the Ambassador asked authorities to begin a search. Today we publish explosive extracts from Lena Last's correspondence to this newspaper. We have honoured her request to delay publication until this date.

'Here's a jolly speech daddy made up. 'Friends, we must begin: with a prayer, a search within, through fields of hope and dream, for a romance born of innocence! We are one family under God,

conceived in liberty: liberty inspires our hearts, and liberty inspires our children. Let truth be our crusade and let us never be moved, for love shall be our holy war and terror will not shake us! Take no counsel with your fears, fight the demon within, for doubts are traitors to us all, and failure is the child of sorrow... (*Am I your child of sorrow, daddy?*) Our family is rich in love, but freedom has its price: there is no freedom that is easy, and we should never turn our backs upon this life. (*I turn my back!*) But let us never be guilty, for dreams don't wait until tomorrow. Dream of things that never were, and say why not! (*Kennedy said that!*) for regretting is the child of sorrow. From sea to shining sea, there are no walls around our hearts, and anger won't defeat us, for we're one family, one family under God.'

When did you lose track of reality in your slush of crusading rhetoric? Your prayers'll come true, but not in the way you think. Your little girl has a *mental illness*. And she's proud of it. She'll fix this world's hypocrisy one way or another, so here's a cool little speech from *her*. 'This family! has to bleed, 'cause all our 'love' ain't set us free: fat pigeons caught in a wire, watch us burn in hell fire. Road to hell, paved with good deeds, this must be a Hollywood movie! Starring Lena Last, human error, collateral damage, fighting terror! But it all comes back, comes back to you: breed a monster, back to you. Spin your wheels of roulette, 'cos you never can bet what you gonna get. Terrorist out of a blue sky! Came from nowhere, wonder why? Crazy kid, maybe a *hero*. Death comes to us all, where's your Ground Zero? Bloody red stains all over the sand, ain't no hell, God's helping hand! Hypocrisy cocktail, what a gas, Islamic State, bet your ass. So have a nice day, of suffering, self-massacur, lemme do my thing. Gonna be nobody, gonna lose my body, gonna be nobody, lose my body...

Listen to me, you masters of war. What's this peace you're killing for? Say you worship the child, but you don't fight for me, I don't need your love, gonna touch *immortality*. Shoulda been born a child of the east, contaminated by your hypocrite world. Say bye-bye to your Christian girl, mummy and daddy's little pearl. I'm the healer of the inhuman race, heroine with the human face. Your towers of steel and glass won't set me free, your superficial love won't touch immortality. None of you 'll come with me (wouldn't wanna quit your promised land) but you'll cry me a river in my desert of endless sand. I am the goddess, no future and no past, and don't you cry for me 'cause your croc-tears never last. I am your nightmare, all you macho men of war. Forget this peace you're all killing for. Slow suicides, all waiting to die, look at your own face, see the great human lie. Immortality. Immortality!'

Yup, dad and me had a bust-up over my Arab Boyfriend. Got so mad he let slip what he really felt. I caught it on my smartphone. I'll use it later.

'Lena my daughter, forget these children of Islam! Their martyr's war, their nihilist zero. Don't be fooled my daughter, indoctrinated minds turn to slaughter. Their Ayatollahs tell them what to believe:



‘cleanse the world of infidel disease! One holy word, one holy law, you unbelievers, death knocks at your door’. There is but one God, but their priests claim to tell who fights for heaven and who for hell. Hypocrisy! Shifting sand, jewelled dagger, hidden hand. I won’t wash my hands, Lena, I won’t turn away. God loves Christians, God loves the CIA! Civilisation, our precious jewel, they all envy that, all these fools. Retribution, righteous war? An eye for an eye, this is their own law! Contaminate the world with their sacrifice, lose their minds waiting for their damned paradise! What kind of people spring from a desert world? Lena my daughter, forget the children of Islam, their martyr’s war. They lead us all to zero.’

Fuck dad, who needs compassion? Welcome to *your* desert world. So I met up with Tarik Saed. In the heat of his country we fucked for days. It was bliss. We had a conversation too. I recorded it. Don’t let anyone tell you I’m not honest.

- I’m doing the new Hejira... exodus... flight

(Him) – *You’d copy the Prophet? Islam is submission, little miss child of privilege. What are you running from? Your parents pumped you up. You’re a product*

- We have to disappear. There’s a voice. It sings impossible things... Love in empty rooms... under my feet the desert blooms... through my hair a still wind blows... the dried-up river, it flows, it flows

- *No rivers in a desert*

- There’s an oasis in my heart

- *Don’t talk like a fool!*

- Why not be fools! Our heads in the sky, feet in trackless sands. The snapping dogs of war, we’ll heed them no more

- *You’re like Narcissus who fell in love with himself. Drowned in his oasis! Face yourself, Lena*

- You’re the voice of fear. You run away in the heart

- *The world’s seen it all, Lena*

- We’re not the world

- *Get real!*

- Real is what you believe

- *Do you wanna grow up?*

- What shall we grow up for? We’ll vanish like the dew. There are no victims. No-one loses.

Death is our friend. Death is a doorway. Maybe it isn’t there at all

- *You’re insane*

- I’ll end this war

- *What war?*

- Loneliness... hate... blame... fear

- *Fall in love with me instead*
- That's a problem right there
- *What's the problem?*
- It's a problem!

He's just another blackmailer. Wants me to fall in LOVE. Jesus let me breathe, need to breathe. I saw my parents' version of love! My trussed-up mother once said:

'Don't talk of despair. Despair is for lonely people. I've got lovers and friends, people desire me. What's the use of crying when you're always in love? Happiness flows in me, fortune rains on me. Dignity? This life is a war! I'm married to 'somebody' so I need to be somebody. I'm free to be *rich*. This dog-eat-dog world. Desires are a girl's best friends. Dying? Only fools are dying. These martyrs, they don't have the guts to live. Don't they see: all you need... all you need is love.'

What love do you have, mum?

Last thing Tarik said to me: 'Your eyes don't see me, you were gone before I came. Your leaving dreams, your fool's romance, your desert heart, your shadow love...'

So I told him: 'We are birds in restless flying, exiles in our own land. Our paths are lost in the pathless wind. How can we deal with human love? Learn to live and die alone in this shadow world. Choose love or solitude. Love is solitude.'

So I took this road, this empty road, sand in my eyes, endless skies, this road to nowhere. How could I face you now, all you superlative people, who know it all. What do you want me to feel? Anaesthetise myself, is that what people do? I told you the naked truth, but it don't set you free. Your submission road, how does it set anyone free? You won't get what you want from me, to surrender, to submit. Where is your higher power? I am the ruler of my own world! What kind of truth makes us forget ourselves? Your shifting drifting truth is never what it is. Don't you know, you fools, your tears are wasted on the wind. Ten thousand people shouting: God, why can't you heal our sins! ...There are no shadows to shelter me now. This burning sun! There is no mercy here. These arid thoughts are bleeding, bleeding me, these vultures of regret are circling, circling me. You birds of prey, you vultures! Don't you laugh, don't you laugh at me, I'm tired, tired of hating it all, I'm tired, tired of hating, of losing, of judging, of wasting it all.

And Tarik was in love with me, in my solitude. Under our feet a desert bloomed. Through our hair a still wind blows, and that dried-up river, flows. I lost my *friend*, mum and dad. Why didn't you know him? You missed my birthday. Seventeen. All your suffocating love. The precious child slips away. The pathways of love are dark. I'm going to be noticed, I'm going to be news! I'm never coming back

to fill your shoes. You invested in me, you gave me choice, and I take it. I'm the flower of our country, the jewel in your lives. Like a stream in the desert, I pour it away! Listen to me, this is my dream. I walk alone, the red-gold desert surrenders to the sky. This precious body, I cast it aside, but don't be so sure that Lena Last has died! Let the families weep and moan, let their faces turn to stone. Let them wring their grasping hands! Ten million people tell me this is sin. What sin? Ten million fragments, spindrift on the wind. You can't judge me, I teach you. You're all slow suicides. You are matchwood in the tides. There is no road. There's nothing but life. Which of you really lives? I live. And to die - is to live.

Elders, I got your last text. I won't agree to it.

'Lena, listen to our prayer. We're trying to understand this terrible game, this romance, that locked you up in your childish world. You know we love you still, and there's nothing in this world but love. Lena, please come home.'

*Love is your weapon to possess me. Your self-importance, your vanity.*

'Sometimes our dreams make fools of us, sometimes they make us blind. Lena, leave your selfish dreams behind. You have to live for something, have to believe in someone! Don't make us blame ourselves. We know we were not always there for you.'

*You're no longer real to me. I am the healer of humanity.*

'You're too young to know yourself, you have not lived enough! You've never learned to forgive. You have not earned the right to die, the right to hurt people. Lena, everyone is watching now. You have what you wanted. Everyone wants you to live. Your people need you, more than life itself. Lena, listen to us!'

*No.*

So here's my last text. The necro-narcissist youth posts her last selfie.

'Helicopter noise. Get lost, all you people. Water bowl. Wash myself. Examine body... as if for the first time. Pour the water away. The helichopper. First grenade. I've two. Don't ask how I got them. Put it down, walk away... cum back. Take in hand. Do you see me? I shud throw the phone away now.

Pull pin!

Guys, it was a dud. See me laugh insanely. See?

I knew it waz a dud. \$&%\*#\$@!!!

Coughing. No breath. Where's my puffer? Throw it away, last time.

I'm on my back now. Look at the blue bowl of sky.

HeliCop... Fuk off!!

Nex grenade. U see it?

This is my freedom, my will. Look at my face. Not sad. Alive. Totally. NOW.

Put fone in safe place.

Back to kill-ground. This time no mistake! Sorry people.

Ciao.

Bye.

Bye.'

. . . . .

Melanie Klein the analyst would have mouthfuls to say about this Lena Last. 'It is the child who will judge the quality of love in a family, but not always in the cool of self-understanding. Without understanding families disintegrate, and failure is passed down the generations. Example: selfishness (neglect, that is) by a parent surely offers excuses for the child to copy by way of aggressive narcissism. It's the unreconstructed child mind that sees the parent as enemy. What a relief to hang onto an infantile *paranoid-schizoid* posture that sees all as either good or bad, threat or charm. How can this aggression be channelled to self-soothing, self-help, paths of maturing? How does the child mind learn to see *ambiguity* in the figures of its world, learn to accept that life is neither black nor white, good or bad, and that outer reality has to face off with their inner fantasy? There will be a battle, battle for empathy, battle for care. The guilty kid will want to show they're sorry. This then is how the *depressive* mind appears: it defends itself against rage or grief and learns by guilt to love others for its 'sins'. This is the mind that gives, accepts, lets, empathises. But see how the earlier paranoid-schizoid mind rears up in the fundamentalist, nothing but arrested development of a child trapped in its early *omnipotence* phase. The last word in attention-seeking!' ...And herein lie the seeds of martyrdom. Child hero Lena Last won't allow for sorrow or guilt. Unambiguous minds can't be tolerant. Lena's rampant id wants to consume the world, while her superego is like a massive censor. Kill! Wow, a clever way to burn off the elder generation and their insidious influence: to kill yourself! Do we need to be dead martyrs to a problem, so that it may pass away from us? The cold punishment and self-punishment of martyrdom *mask* the regret and need and guilt. So what of the poor parents, familial victims of fundamentalist violence? They, leapfrogging over us will become our own children in future lives, and they will need all of our good nurturing, victims of punishment that they now are. And we won't be able to give it, fundamentalist punishers that we are. Long live the sins of the fathers. Oh yes!

### Another Girl

Matty, these days I'm writing words to depressing ballads. I send you a sample... A girl from a half-century ago longs to dream a notion of freedom, and it's only the youthful breath of her generation that allows such thoughts. Despite the weighing fear that her life will be closeted by duty and past, by the predations of a needy mother who lost her husband and now is losing her mind, her battle is for love: about taking risks that (brutally) expose her own need. Need is her *animus*, the unfulfilled thing, always festering where dishonesty is. Some people deal with it by *splitting*: google nazis, fundamentalists and feminists (!) and see how women have undergone untold psychic wanderings in support of a better self. Your mother Marsha paid out a lot to dodge the crush of the generations, the mindless rehash of the past. And though you are freer than her, you shouldn't be led to take the world as a cynical joke. So, in case you ever try to project a better or more ideal version of yourself (and you will) you should understand splitting.

Margie in her raincoat finds a phonebooth somewhere in Soho. It drips redly in the rain, windows all fogged. She smells old cigarettes and cold sick. Greenish cold concrete. The usual dogged offers of sex for money. Long-dead chips mush under the sole of her shoe. A cold draught from under, fingers her thighs. She takes a napkin from her bag (filched from a café when the waitress looked the other way) and wipes the mouth of the phone. Finds her pennies, dials the number.

Mother? Yes it's me. Oh, walking. In the city. No, a friend. A female friend. Oh mum, it's 1963! The shop windows. They dress them up for girls like me. Nothing special today. No, work is fine. There's a play in the West End. *Long day's journey into night*. I might go to it. Never been to a play... No, not today.

Heading home. After eight. Don't be late. Girls on the underground. Bare knees in raincoats. It's the rainy season. Darkens early. Strangers in a crowd. *Petals on a wet black bough*, says a poem in the train. No-one glances till you lay down and die. Heading home.

I'm here, mum. You didn't eat? I'll make you tea. Did anyone call? Anyone at all? You should answer the phone. You know it'll be me. Daddy? He'll be back. Yes, tomorrow. Shopping, I told you. Just a pair of shoes. Nothing special. Well, because I choose. What's on TV? There's a world to see. On the TV.

*Is there time, time for me?*

Tomorrow. Long day's journey into hell - o mum it's me. Just walking. In the city. With a girl. Another girl. Just another girl. The windows. They do them up for girls like me. Oh, work is fine. Yes, telephones chattering, typewriters clattering. *We're going blind. Going out of our minds*. Daddy? He's not coming today. Tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow.

There's a reason I keep a diary, writes Margie to herself. How will I remember the old things? How will I remember this day? This day I write about a girl called... we'll call her *Margie*... who had a special friend. Solange. We used to take walks, she and me, in the streets of the great city. We'd admire windows together. Selfridges, Debenhams, John Lewis, M & S. At weekends we'd go to Kew. Walking in the greenwood we'd hold each other's hand. Then we'd go to her flat. Always to hers. Our first times were the loveliest. We'd lie in bed and look out her window at the green trees over the wall. The radio would be on. Her hand would rest on my skin. I loved it how she owned my body. She was a better girl than me.

*A better life, a free*

*A better world for you and me*

*Sunday lovers. Nothing to do or say*

*Paradise. On a blue Sunday.*

And despite it all I'd always go home. Back on the tube to the black east. To mother.

But one day when my girlfriend's brother came to live, everything changed. He used to look at us, from one to the other. He'd grin at me in his shirtsleeves with his gold-tooth grin and slicked-back hair. He seemed to think he knew me. She and me could never be private then. Why did she let him come? He seemed to think he had the right. One Sunday afternoon when she was at the shops buying flowers and tea, he took me into our bedroom and fucked me right there on our bed. He said to me I wanted it. He said I was 'a bit of all right'. And when his sister - my friend - came home, I said not a thing. I left.

And I never went back. And do you know... she never came looking for me. Many weeks after, I found a back-street woman who did a job. It was painful and cruel. Mother never knew. No-one did.

...Heading home. After eight. Don't be late. Girls on the underground. Bare-kneed, raincoats and scarves. The rainy season, darkens early. Strangers in a crowd. *Petals on a wet black bough*. No-one glances till you lay down and die... Heading home.

Oh Mum, you didn't eat? I'll make you tea. Did anyone call? Anyone at all? You should answer the phone. You know it'll be me. Daddy? Tomorrow, tomorrow. Shopping, I told you. Just a pair of shoes. Nothing special. Well, because I choose. What's on TV? There's a world to see. On the TV.

*Is there time, time for me?*

Long day's journey into hell - o mum. It's me. Oh, walking. In the city. With a girl. Another girl. Not that one. Just a girl. Another girl.

There was a reason I keep a diary, writes Margie. What was it? Oh yes. How will I remember the best things? How will I remember today? I wrote a story about a nice girl. A girl better than me. Called... oh, we'll call her Margie.

### **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 wary 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 prenticeship 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 will shrivel now. For 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.*

### **Dreams of Leaving**

When a woman (or in fact a man) seeks at last a place beyond that of victim, beyond revenger against the victim she herself used to be, beyond turning into a professional persecutor, beyond all fleeing, beyond the endless round of suicides slow or quick, beyond drowning in conscience to the point where she is maddeningly split... she may come to a point where she sees the *animus* must be faced - not run from, not murdered, not fought in a war, not loved to death - but faced. And it may then become her strange partner, her ghost partner in an agonised slow dance of self-healing.

In the city of Havana, a place in the grip of the hard fictions of propagandist war, the traveller Blank attends a movie alone in some dim and archaic theatre. Is it loneliness that makes him always want to relate scenes to Marsha, his girl back home? Why the need to know her, inside out? 'Why am I so beguiled (he asks) by the image of woman as warrior? Gender wars turn her more fearsome than any

man, and as in Marsha's case how badly I hope feminism doesn't descend to intolerant fundamentalism. Gender wars will certainly make militants of women, and by a kind of asceticism, a running away, they may find themselves in a greater war: supposedly a 'war for cleansing', a revenge on the way men are historically in love with war. But war, even in the guise of a battle against war, is addictive, and women participate. So, because they are required to face, to engage the *animus*, sublimation of war as feminism is not the answer. We must come to *honesty*. What honesty? A woman is half man just as man is half woman, and the difference between the two in terms of psychological need is *nil*. Dance with the killer in yourself, they say, or with the fatal lover. But these are nothing but the dance with *animus*.

When a man goes off to scale his hard mountains, it is usually the woman who is left to suffer. Such a woman was Ruth Turner, the 'Botticellian' wife of George Leigh Mallory, British hero who in 1924 froze on Everest and may have been first to conquer its peak. And for wife and husband an ugly dilemma was nurtured, between the need for sweet domestic love-duty and the longing for daredevil adventure. In reverse fashion, the writer Hemingway couldn't abide it when his lover Martha Gellhorn sought out portentous places and events that he didn't or couldn't, outdid him in gritty compassion and even wrote more eloquently on the experience. But she was a reporter first, novelist second, and she fed on hard objective reality while he turned it to fiction, dabbled with soft lies. He was a narcissist, she coolly anti-romantic as she chiselled her cool horror out of events like the Spanish War. Using them to nurture her hatred at warmongering governments, she wanted to fight for the principle of suffering, which seemed to imply that Hemingway fought only for the principle of himself (since he was a novelist). But in the long run (he'd say) who will care for your hard truths unless they are softened to fiction? Who can swallow another person's diaristic lists of life's outrage? One might if they apostrophised those things as fiction, hinted at 'death as romance', 'horror as intimacy', 'power as deep feeling' (etcetera): in short, made myth and soap opera out of history. And life, he would sagely tell her, is the tender horrific waltz with our opposite, our canceller, our utter negation.

In the movie scene, *she* comes to him abruptly one morning in their breakfast room. He's seated at the head of table in his usual shorts with stubble and black coffee and toast and newspaper. Tropic birds squawk outside a latticed window. She is strangely dressed, in attire that might suggest golf or travel or shopping, or dislocation. He notes it, says nothing. She goes twice to the kitchen as if with purpose, but he knows it is a signal for entrapment in this house and all it signifies, and a prelude to what she must say. So he chews on, scans economic statistics. Statistics are cleaner than people. At last she stands in front of him. *Listen to me. I have to leave. Despite what we said I have to go.* The context is ripe, based on earlier legendary scenes. This time she has built new resolve, though the issue is clearly unsimple. There are ties and needs, hair-balanced contradictory feelings. Such messes make a hard-

headed woman want to clear them out. Or drown in them. *Are you listening?* she demands. *Your fruitless journey to your holy war*, he mutters in his beard. She swallows, flushes red on cue.

Fruitless journey? That is a writer's phrase! What journey, to what war? Am I just some kind of a metaphor? But even as she'd exit his fiefdom she still wears the badge of it, still deals out novelistic phrases.

- *This is my time, to shake my world*, she breathes.
- Oh yeah. Your great crusade for your woman's cause
- *But there's something rich, something real...*

She can't explain. Can't breathe where there's no air.

- Higher than fame? Deeper than pain?

His sentence doesn't appear from nowhere, but from torturous paths they've trod and flattered and razed together. Each step in this febrile intellectual space of shared agony (this child of theirs) has cost them, and the love sap has dried on the bone. This torture is their achievement, their intimacy, like Martha and George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

- *Something*, she says.
- Our struggle starts again
- *After the shouting I'll go away*
- And you don't love me, and you will pay
- *Is there any man who isn't lying? Is there life, is there life before dying?*
- Your voyeur's war exploits the dying! And your fool's crusade: you talk of lying? Leave me, abandon me. The burden of me
- *You're like a child*
- Let me be your child. What is this war? You want that place of dying?
- *I need to choose*
- All your talk of leaving.

He is unassailably patronising even when vulnerable. But there is something unendurably samey about a woman's embrace of emotive triggers.

- *You know you killed it all?*
- Can't you see, can't you see I'm lonely? Don't you see I need you?

Amazing how he can ramp the triggers this early and at a place so mundane as breakfast. Perhaps it's all at his fingertips, the self-referencing ironic writer.

- *You married the fool you wanted, she says. And you lost the wife you fear.*

Who'd fail to take responsibility for marrying someone? (Blank wonders) Only a woman who wants to be seen as a dupe so that the man will irretrievably despise her. And what kind of fool would fear such a woman out of sheer competitiveness? Only him. But now she smirches her clever little truth in excess.

- *You're drowning me. Drowning me*

- You drown in blood and sorrow! Your martyr's sorrow.

Her dream of being a war correspondent won't sustain her. Or, (thinks he) maybe it will, since she can turn it into a huge projection of 'her loss' and then cry grand, bitter compassion tears for all souls forever. Until it turns to hate: of the one she left behind, the one she refused to face or share it all with. And then it'll be too late! But all this has been wearily said already. Ellipsis is all that's left to them.

- *Is there any man who isn't lying?*

- Is there love, love before dying?

And he rhymes her, such is his word mastery. The old choice! Life outside of him, or love inside his terrible tender ego. Narcissists like him are too fine at evoking sympathy. But great men with no acolytes, they shrivel and die. Does she want that on her conscience? Ugh. Her only riposte is formality.

- *Please don't talk of love*

- But I love you still

- *Don't talk of love to me!*

- Tell me why not. (In sorrow) Tell me why not!

(And this with righteous protest) - *Because it kills us in the end!*

But he'll ignore the little tragic, just as he has seen more wars and huntings and killings and grittiness than she ever has. Is this not precisely why he values tenderness? She cannot know it, not till she goes away to waltz with the horror herself.

- Kills us? (he says) What kind of thought is that? What kind of lie?

- *Ignore my dreams! Steal them all away*

- Ignore your foolish dreams? I built this life for you, I gave it all for you. Go play the heroine, play the martyr's sweetheart, the voyeur priestess, the fool.

And she knows she is inexperienced. But for how long will it be so? This fakery, this putting of her in a corner like an adolescent!

- *It's time to leave*
- Time to lie
- *Time to live!*
- Time to die!

Now then mister, make her loathe you! So that her hate can give *you* energy to win her back, and cure her of her loathing.

- Learn to care for something, woman. Bigger than yourself
- *Greater than yourself?*
- Search for something tender. Something lasting
- *Something lasting, something real, something deeper, deeper than yourself*
- Yes, deeper than *your* self. Something greater than your power dream.

*Her* power dream! Novelists speak with eloquence of dirty things inside themselves. What novelist can resist the chance to bray his erudition? Or is this some curious new mode of confession? The woman has seen all that hard masculine ambition in herself. And his precision of intellect is always the ground she feels compelled to play on, since both of them prize it. Totalitarian intellect bestows legitimacy whether we are man or woman. However, so practised is he that he reverts to naked emotion - and she can't resist, because she knows this is ground he concedes in some kind of narcissistic *good faith* despite his gross exaggerations! And now it's tempting for the hard woman to seem confused, to snag up their familiar pain cocoon, all for the sake of sneaking away under its shroud.

- *Yes, I stand for something. I stand for me! For me. In this place of lying. In the face of lying*
- But (he counters) I gave you your life
- *What life?*
- Life before dying! Don't you see, I wanted it all for you?

And now she is skewered by irony! How easy for him now, to hang out over the enticing precipice of their lovers' suicide. But she is compelled to club him once again with her brutal faith.

- *Then show me! Show me. Show me something higher*
- Higher than fame? Deeper than pain?
- *Richer, richer!*
- Richer than your sentimental leaving dreams?

- *Than your power dreams!*
- Than your voyeur's war, your woman's crusade.

But he is a fool, because he has cut at her heart. Which lets her seal up the compact.

- *You see, I always had to leave you*
- You never have to leave me
- *I always, always had to leave.*

And yet at the very last he seems to acquiesce.

- Yes. Yes. You always had to leave...'

And this clever clever *irresolution* of his... will define the woman's future: in the war zones of death and crying, where she will go and where she'll faithfully report and write her censures of chaos worlds created by stupid men, where she'll avenge herself by writing and having studious fools read it... she will feel that one battle of the heart has never been won, that one odyssey has never found its *Ithaca*... the odyssey of her marriage to another human being.'

### **I Am a Country**

When should a fey wanderer plant a staff, get involved, nail his colours to the mast? This question haunts the traveller Blank, congenial tourist that he is. 'Marsha, I want to talk about history, and its two stripes: enslavement and the struggle to overcome. And despite my need to avoid being fixated by anything, I want still to talk of things where you and I might have met in partnership, fought a fight together. That old dream of mine! Things not to run from, worth fighting against or for, for which to be inextricably part of the mass, part of politics, part of history, of a country. My old war for romance! By the by, did I ever tell you about my partner-in-arms, Kathleen?

In the late 1980s we summer tourists considered it very significant and spooky to be travelling to the east of Berlin from the West. We had 'political statement' tattooed to our chests. One fine day my newly-minted friend Kathleen, a self-styled political journalist, for the purpose of instruction led me out of town and to a farm where we made a little picnic. I noted a giant wall running straight through our cornfield in a rather pleasing curve that matched the rump of the hill. And though it was gratifyingly forged in smooth concrete, spikes and razor wire lined its top and watchtowers glowered. It looked truly well-conceived, and permanent. Kathleen had brazenly brought me to this spot to feed on an irony gift that kept on giving.

'What can we say (she declaimed) of a country that needs walls and watchtowers and machine guns and uniformed murderers to keep its citizens *in*? One might be excused for thinking it is no country at

all. There's a perfection in man known as the *totalitarian mind*. Was there ever invented a perfect system of thought that wasn't intolerant? Welcome to the brave Democratic Stasi Republic of Germany! From catastrophe we forge meaning and hope, beyond rapacious capitalism we forge selfhood and purity. The state must control the emotional response of its people, bringing them to the same position as the state, though regrettably one must at times express it through repression. Dissenters must understand! We nurture an idea that explains all things, a web of logical consequence, a self-watering system beyond the capitalist bogs of unmeaning. And since the human is rightly horrified at his paucity in a vast universe, we let *protection* and *safety* define us, so that one day our citizens will be satisfied to argue no more. History thus solves the dilemma of itself. Alien things deliver fear, embarrassment, shame. Thus we protect the soul of our people. Once true value is entrenched, all is measured by its virtue, and to contravene immaculate laws is subversive, thereby mentally defective! Our state is thus explicable even in its cool cruelty, which we regret! Our system is the difference between life and oblivion, and we must kill for it. Outside Threats leave us no choice, for *they* envy us, hate our love of order. The Threat is not imagined. Hence these walls.'

Kathleen pauses for breath. She needs to re-visit the obvious, rub her sores, recite her litany. It is the cool measure of totalitarianism that its opponents have no choice but to ape it in their rejection-zeal. How masterly the haters become at it. And since I'm an airhead tourist who fails to be boiled up to the correct level of outrage, Kathleen has made it her mission to squirt it in my very cells. Next day at breakfast in her cavernous flat in soon-to-be-trendy Charlottenburg, she briefs me for my Visit to the East. I am to take a train under the city, must proceed 'at snail's pace' through ghostly barred stations under Alexanderplatz, for this is the most arresting way to grasp the dead hand of communism rather than the rather comically cheery Checkpoint Charlie experience, manned as it is by gum-chewing Yankee ingenues who just don't appreciate the weight of their role guarding the gates against deep implacable history for dorky tourists like me. Going to the East is therefore a pilgrimage, a stepping into a sanctified stage set where the calamitous evil of the past must be measured and weighed and breathed and sucked into one's skin with all studious devotion suitable to the holy European experience.

On the wall of Kathleen's lofty white kitchen is a huge blue painting of Hitler's head. Indigestible irony seems the order of the day. I chew my indigestible muesli and contemplate Adolf's avuncular blue moustache. I also ponder at Kathleen's steely need to hate with proper consistency, and no doubt I let her fill in for my guilt at my own hoary feelings... She has painted large portraits of thirty American presidents, all in garish primary colours, and the canvases are stacked up noisomely in the dining room. To me they are testament to misdirected effort. Still, a cause is a cause is a cold war. Otherwise she drives an antique red sports car (an MG I believe) at angry speed as if claiming territory for all right-thinking new Europeans, just in case these commies don't get it. Up yours. In



Berlin, dripping and bleeding with history, it is necessary to take a *position*, and not at all acceptable to be laid back or surrendered to a lazy and wandering serendipitous outlook. Kathleen and I argue studiously over the ironies of attacking fundamentalism with a tenacity equal to it, she claiming it to be a battle of moralities, me pointing out that we should focus either on forgetting or transcending it. At that she calls me a new-age hippie with a narcissism complex and Freudian repression complex, and I in turn call her a masochistic lout and political tart for living in Berlin anyway. She tells me to fuck off out of her house and I decline with a shit-eating grin. She is really not in control, old Kath. In truth I *am* a voyeur, who slavers at the horrors of history, who fetishises the idea of repressive regimes for the delicious shiver of fear they extract from me, all those prisons and torturings and indecent ideological outrages. But I'm keen as well to let Kathleen feel the anger for me, since I am a Wanderer and above such things. She knows what a fake I am, and needs to be my lofty mentor. So this is really why I am at her house in Berlin. She has no other pupils. Has she friends? A pile of acquaintances no doubt, at all those parties round the city she studiously attends, where black-clad activists and artists of every stripe shout at each other in a hot fog of righteous polemic to make them all feel they are at least contributing intelligent noise to the great cold war battle for human rights. Kathleen, despite haughtily telling me on arrival there was as much chance of me entering her bed as Erich Honecker or Gorby tearing down The Wall (thereby making me think her abrupt comparison was not only her way of initiating a silly outsider into brute realities of life in a divided city, but also how lonely she was and wanting to hide it), one night after I'd been there a mere week and had stuck my head into her cavernous no-man's land of a bedroom to bid her 'sweet dreams', she sort of groaned inwardly at both my weedy irony and the embarrassing foolishness of my being single and unconnected in big Berlin and suddenly ordered me to get my arse under her (protective) sheets. By and by I was rudely initiated in the joys of long-legged Kathleen's version of sex, which was pretty violent and mirthless till I physically restrained her by getting on top and making her slow down to the point where we actually looked at each other and where her steely eyes were forced to moderate to milky rapture under my soft but masculine pressure into her deepest parts, and where she blushing and vulnerably realised that slow rhythmic fucking might actually be a sensation her stringy nerves could benefit from. British girl Kathleen is six-foot one inch tall, even more when her boofed eighties hair sits on top. And her legs stick out as she strides down the *strasses* in red scarves with her strutting bony sort-of elegance, as if she assumed she were always being spied on when in fact no-one ever watches. And all is misdirected urgency as she zooms about in her red MG, knees jammed against the dash jerking the gearstick to and fro like the neck of one of her hated child dolls. When we first met in London, within two days she more or less ordered me to Berlin, and I assumed she was a lot more eager under her studiedly impersonal politician exterior than she let herself admit. Anyway I came. She then made a complex fuss about whether I should stay at her apartment, which I took as another smokescreen. Of course there's no way I'd ever try to point out her neediness; I am not concerned, being a tourist. I move on. This habitual wanderer sees people's lives of fixation and investment and

possession and profession and accoutrement and suburb with a smug schadenfreude, as if he'd done and seen it all and gone beyond, which makes him immediately vulnerable to beady-eyed critics like Kathleen who are hypersensitized to disrobe all that bourgeois hippie non-committal shit. But I actually don't mind being shredded by her at all. I've seen that milky shroud that comes over her eyes at moments, and I know it to be some doubting vision of softer and bodily things. All the same, one's commitment must be to *ideas* only, not to bodies or relationships. And ideas sure take up a lot of space. History is there for the young to get steamed up about, and Cold War Berlin and its Wall is the perfect place for Kathleen. Not forever, but certainly for now.

On arrival by train in East Berlin then, and following numerous checks by green guards who warily eye this latest batch of visitors as if unable to decide whether we are indeed subversive westie spies or just dimwits who really are curious about this implacable shit-hole they are forced to live in, a motley knot of us are let out to roam the dim streets. Those bored guard fellers surely cannot imagine the cold shiver of shock we feel beneath our coats. I feel the eyes of Kathleen upon me, her hot voice in my ear pointing out iniquities brick by brick. Strangely proud am I to be her representative, and suddenly I wish she were here with me, gripping my arm. Though it is spring I feel cold, and the wan sun refuses to penetrate these canyon streets. Blockish high buildings, some semi-restored, most patched and stained, with inscrutable windows from which no-one looks, seem embarrassed, cold-shouldered, deserted: a feeling as if the populace has boycotted itself, as if the Deutsche Socialist Dream had taken the day off, or the week or the decade. In my pocket I clutch filthy west-capitalist deutschmarks, having been told I must spend at least fifty. My stomach rumbles and I don't know where to go, and wonder if there is such a thing as a toilet or a place to eat. I venture down some old-cobble street and discover by miracle a dim doorway and tables within, and upon entering its greyling interior and bemeeting a nondescript girl in an apron, discover this room is in fact a restaurant. I am alone, but sit anywheres and ask for a menu. Instead she recites at least three items I am permitted to consume. By and by I get a cup of groggy tea, thin sandwich and bit of dry cake (whipped cream is off) which she brings from some backroom vault, all deserted apart from a weedy-looking man in chef's costume. There are no other signs of food, or life for that matter. It is paranoia-making to eat in this silence, and I'm glad to hand over a wad of notes and get out. But I thank the girl and she seems surprised, sending me a harried-vacant look. Two streets away I find a dark little music shop, slip in, grab some scores by the good communist Hans Eisler, pay fifty marks and step out with my contraband in a brown paper bag. My legs are cold. I find myself in a central square surrounded by rows of flat concretey buildings, ogled over by an terrifyingly high tower. Along one side of the square is... aha! the famed Centrum department store. A hallowed space one must visit, I say to myself (I find I self-talk in this place), and since the shelves seem to be empty of most items one associates with department stores, empty space turns out to be the compelling event. Outside, in the slabby waste called Alexanderplatz I come across a group of youths hanging by a concrete box with a withered tree struggling out of it. I sit

and without compunction or thought say: I'm a Westie. How d'you all like living in this place? And without compunction or thought one answers: *It is scheisse. Shit, you understand?* Warum? I ask. Another fellow chimes in in good English: *There is no incentive to do any fucking thing at all. I wish one day to own my own business but I know I never will. Welcome to communism, man. And screw the government!* Aha! I suspect a time is not long coming when this acidic Commie faux dream shall wither and gurgle into the nearest drain. If the young are talking like this? Slam dunk. And something criminally juicy to report to Kathleen. (Maybe she'll reward me if I tell it right... I start to picture a new bed scene and her long thighs and her (by now) requirement that I take control and 'tame' her... breathy hot murmurs in my lover's face signifying heroic ventures in the East, even as she eases me inside with a ghost of appeal in her eyes, as if I'd offer her a better, deeper life...) Uh? Okay, I'm ready to get the fuck out and home. Home? To the West! And some prickly sense of guilt I've fobbed off all afternoon flummers in. Don't have the guts to face what ninety per cent of the world faces every single day! Pampered Westerner, bourgeois traveller running from pain and need, running from engagement, from the grit and shit of life. I feel breathless, hollow. Thought you'd be better than this, stronger than this, but no, your boundless estimation of yourself just withered, hero self-dream choked up. Run Blank run, for your life! Beyond youth, beyond idealism, we can't change a thing in this world. Mass sadness, mass punishment, failure of societies, failure of countries, make me a loser too. Marsha, I'm involved! I am inextricably part of a mass. I am politics. I am history. I am a country.'

### **Atonement**

In a museum in Kolkata is a manuscript that tells of a Bengali potentate who lived in Howrah district some three centuries ago. For reasons unknown he conducted wars to consolidate his power, and was in time victorious in the entire area. This warlord had contempt for non-conformists, and saw fit to imprison and persecute all the local musicians, who apparently refused to cease their playing in the vicinity of his hearing. This warlord seemed to respect the narrow fundamentalism of ascetic paths, of which silence was the essence. The lord though, had a wife. And it was she who agitated clandestinely to arrest his wars and to reverse his domestic policy, perhaps by 'collaborating' with officers who might lend at the very least a sympathetic ear. The lord, who could not take criticism of any kind, discovered it, imprisoned her and sentenced her to beheading. It was a rash act, and carried out before he would accept better advice. From whom can a fundamentalist accept advice? Besides, he clearly thought he had no choice, such was the logic of his position in this earthly theatre. But following the death and burial of his wife, a strong sense of guilt began its plague of him. Out of the guilt he developed a pernicious skin disease, and in the agony of it would associate with no-one. Only one woman, a servant dispassionate enough not to judge him outright, and who had secret connections with an ascetic of the forest, allowed herself to tell her lord of this ascetic and to urge him to go to the forest and humbly seek his cure. The warlord, sufficiently immersed in cynicism at this miserable world by the betrayal of a faithless wife, told her to summon the wood dweller to him, since a man of

his position (entrenched now as victim) had no intention of stooping to anyone. The ascetic came, threw *vibhuti* (holy ash) over him and disappeared. Thus began the salving of his skin. In time the physical cure was done, and surely was sufficient lesson to make him accept some supernatural Unseen that puppeteers the acts of men. But no immediate salve could be had for his remorse and guilt, and he died overburdened with it soon enough. In a future life, the poor wife would adopt the role of his mother in order that he might atone for his sin of arrogance. And in that future life he would be called to become a musician, to learn compassion for the vulnerable souls he persecuted. Such is the way of things, wherein history has no end, and the seeds of gone things inexorably ripen in fields of the future.

‘But every loss of our viewpoint is a progress! At last we pass from a closed truth to an open truth: a truth like life itself, too great to be trapped by points of view because it embraces every point of view and sees the utility of each thing at every stage of an infinite unfolding. It is a truth great enough to deny itself and pass endlessly into a higher truth.’ Sri Aurobindo said it, and I quote him to show the insanity, the tendency of a man to entrench a belief system and defend it to the death rather than face its blessed dissolution. Intellectual totalitarians convinced of their purity must attack and punish so-called impurity wherever they find it. That they have lost connection with the *chthonic* (unconscious soul) that made and nurtured them becomes obvious to all but them. The fundamentalist clings to his rock, inviting everyone to descend to his level, to reactively cling to their own rocks. Yes, the mind is a wonderful servant but an evil master, and in the spiritual bank account, ideology is a parade of zeroes without a ‘one’ in front. The one is love! Marsha, this is a story the *Shastri* told for my benefit. Take responsibility! he wryly whispers. And though I might (as in Hindu tales) wish to blur the boundary between individual and ‘everyman’, to hide in my personal soul cave from the indivisible Soul of the World... nevertheless this Lord of Howrah was a flesh and blood person. And a person he still is, to this day. *He is me.*

### **The Eternal Wish-River**

*Benares* - where communist and empiric poet Bertolt Brecht in his ‘American’ opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, urges his loose and fallen women to run off to - is somewhere unimaginable, a dimension beyond the greedy clutch of money or the fey mist of decadence. It is where all sins are paid out, in fact. At the burning *ghats* of Benares (Varanasi as it is known) the fleshy living transform themselves into the dead. They would not see it that way, and this is the point: that the dead are said to come to life in a wider field, or the living to greater living in an ever-widening gyre, and it is not that the walking dead go to a sleeping death, poured as ash into the oily waters of the *Ganga* and spreadeagled to the sea... but that the soul is released from its temporary sheath, making us see that this thing called death does a job our weak minds couldn’t do in eighty years of seasons - to know how we are borderless, unconfined, even as we juggle the miseries and jollities of confinement. In this

eternal becoming, how can there be death as event? Yet the Hindu elders come, let the sacred *Ganga* carry them into the rubbish or purity of a greater stream, as they merge in the myth and the dream. Here in Benares we are urged not to want mastery, but to surrender.

Blank records: 'The funeral fires burn as they've done for centuries, and by the dozen. The business of transfiguration goes on without cease. I stand on a terrace overlooking the river and watch boys play cricket in the alleys between the pyres, and though flames lick sideways at their insouciant lithe heads they don't care: the ashy smoke that rises in lurid sunlight is just their wriggly fun maze. At intervals a skull explodes with a satisfying pop, signalling the release of a soul, not to be confused with the soft smack of leather on willow. The boys cry out sharply nonetheless in a kind of celebration. It is New Year's day. I am slightly embarrassed to be casually watching bodies at the heralding of a new year; normally we'd be celebrating with booze and dancing. Several hours ago I went to a little restaurant in the alleys and the red-faced proprietor, sullied by evil western drink, at midnight pulled out a shotgun, staggered into the alley and blasted off several rounds into the inky night. Why would he want to herald the date and time and circumstance? Surely none of these exist, only the *everness* - though it be boringly muscularly ticking by inch by inch, or clouding away into indeterminacy with the losing of one's mind under ash clouds that hunger and hang like grey washing above the wide raggy river. In the hospital hotel behind this terrace, used-up hindu souls wait for days and weeks to die, then to be shovelled inch by inch to the river like an implacable cigarette conveyor or a blocked drain. The masters of the fires are *harijans*, untouchables, and it is a delicate Indian irony that they shall have the sacred duty of making fires for the passing of the holy dead. I spoke to the wood merchant, and he told me his family had been supplying and building the pyres at this *ghat* for seven generations. Always they are newcomers, because *harijans* are a public nuisance now and forever. Nevertheless the corpses are expertly bound in cotton and linen and doused with ointments and unguents and incense and brought for placement on the piles. In little climactic flourishes, smoke spurts out and upward from pancaked layers as the fires leer up. And strangely not a single odour reaches us. The process is utterly without smell, with not a hint of burning flesh. The *harijan* enablers smile at our bewilderment.

Out on the oily river where I venture with a boatman at dawn accompanied by an American pastor, there seems no sense of connection to the solid earth. The yankee sits at the rear, a tall buddha. *I ain't mediatin', just sittin' here*, he coolly announces. Dawn mists flutter inches above waters that seem to breathe them as lung-threads of its vaporous organism. Detritus soft-bumps our hull: cows, intact monkeys, people parts... mingling with the ash of bodies shredded in fire and frittered outward in the languishing waters... waters that merge with mud-black shoreline as if there's no handhold, no future... rather a muddy shroud spread over the corpse of the will, the corpse of all clean sanctity in this clouded miasma of living. The river to me is like oilical shimmers of neverness, beyond meaning

or human life. Where is rest for any of us? Not at the borders of our skin! The boatman accepted our coins with a little bow of his head, and the tooth-gap smile said it was a privilege, not business. But here... the lugubrious indeterminate soupy skeins of land and sea and sky are the coiling of nothingness on itself, as if it lingers in a shrug of quiescent meandering dreaming without care or consequence. Who on earth do you claim to be? it whispers. You are all of this ash and waters, and the spell and smell and blue-green mud and slow flood of murky light and mist without end. You are all eternity, you are opaque.

But I'm restless at all this cloying deathiness! I want to imagine... if this were Switzerland, all would be frisky fresh sparkling blueness, all shiver-angled peaks above a blue white lake ringed by soft-curved shorelines and neat human stones dovetailing to the ripple of translucent waters. A superior eternal wish, a better indulgence for the westerner soul who wants to live on, in the blueness of his own dream... and to direct it.'



### **All Too Human**

I am seated at the back of a serpent train that nudges its way through Swiss mountains (Blank records). Your writer-tourist peers through his window at the snake-headed engine rounding an apron of track ahead, and the carriages follow on like lemmings in a dream. On such a train all journeys are postponement: up front is where the action is, but such is the calamity of time that as things occur they are forever done; every moment is still-born as it slides into the void. It seems that someone already lived what I am to be. It is *me*. Sit in front then, believe in the raw flood of the world rushing in your eyes! Or else skulk far back like this, imbibing the stale flickerings of things already done. Thus my past writes my future. Who can challenge this eternal becoming? A work by Swami Muktananda is in my hands. *Where are you going?* is its title. This day in the bright air of unmoved mountains, of bold peaks dreaming on in brazen immortal sky, where human lives are as short as summer gnats, we are fools to believe we create. Newness is our charade, originality our infant game of hide and seek, our busyness but the shout of newfangled children in a playpen. What we call *time* is a concoction of juggling, *place* just a kingdom of myopia, *personality* a confection of slurried choices and *wisdom* just confetti or snowflake plankton in oceanic dreams. Imagine instead the simplest thing in all of life. When you are here with yourself alone, and there are no thoughts of anything outside, no thoughts of the endless doings of others: this is the end, the empty moment, the great silence, the screen, present everywhere, whereon all things are projected: this eternity, this *I am*. Whether we seek to become or not become, we become nothing. So why fret? The game is gone whenever I shut my eyes; all forms melt away and I return to myself. What is karma? The ego wanders the spaces: it can't

ever *be*, can't ever be nothing. Even when we refuse to seek, we must become something. We are travellers. The train slides on through impossible mountains and valleys. We are the dreamers of things... we conjure all.

Marsha, you often said I resemble a stubborn goat. Here I am then on a mountain trail, a trail of things that one Friedrich Nietzsche might have felt and done. I harbour a question for him. *Why does suffering never overcome itself? Why does the serpent eat its own body?* Today I come to the village of Sils Maria in the Swiss Engadine. Fooling myself it is a pilgrimage into risk and loneliness, I really came to make myth and romance out of Nietzsche. These nestled villages under jagged alpine peaks make me feel, like he did, an alarming disconnect. He spent summers here, nursed his syphilitic body in a boarding house. He knew only too well how wisdom is rooted in lived experience, how bodily suffering made him what he was, that it was his true teacher. And he made an almighty effort but never eluded pain. We can be nothing but what we are, he concluded, and torment makes us human, all too human. Pain nullifies morality, and there can be no place for good or ill, for a judging god, an *exterior* god. We must take control of ourselves. But for how long? How to sustain the impossible responsibility of being alone? Shouldn't we go mad and die?

Nietzsche was a kind of herald to a new age, an original punk philosopher. With his *beyond good and evil*, his *fuck you* to the past, to religion, to bourgeoisness, to civilisation, to system itself - he pioneered the thrilling idea of self-responsibility. This killer of god and of good and evil, this murderer of karma, having rejected the external arbiter, external morality - finds there is nothing but the will, and it is a will to power. So he creates the *Overman*, which in fact signifies power over suffering, release from both the state of ignorance (suffering's origin) and from the body. Through will we become *nothing but the absolute source of our own experience*. And there is an utter liberating power in this! Nietzsche's will resonates through time, and there's no wonder I stand here in the village of Sils Maria, a cloying tourist wanting the romance of it. But will to power admits no weakness or sickness, and certainly no pity. Like the hero-god Dionysus, it admits to no pain or suffering. No wonder the Nazis made Nietzsche their patron saint, all abetted by the insidious propaganda of his sister, who edited the great man to suit history. Yet this little man, at the suffering centre of destiny, is left with no choice but to spawn the Overman and to create its prophet, who is precisely himself. And Nietzsche *as Zarathustra* dwells in high snows aloof from men, though (significantly) below the peaks - because to reach the pinnacle of a train of thought, the peak of a mountain, all systems are intrinsically destroyed, and there is nowhere left to go but down. But the peaks! The lonely, the snow-clad, the impossible, the suicidal last station before the utter void. How wonderful! A moment there, and nothing can be as it was ever again. And he feels the absolute privilege, and the weight, of being human. *How much one feels lies beneath oneself*, he says. But a time comes when Zarathustra tires of wisdom, feels caged in solitude. What use is a peak when others are safely tucked in their warm

houses in the valley? It is a mere story, a legend that no valley-dweller will believe in unless they have accompanied us there. So Zarathustra descends to the marketplace and consults the people. Where is God? Have you seen him? And he is caught, because whether this is a self-challenge for the sake of humility or the seeking of a disciple, his very rhetoric implies the invocation of an external God. Why overlook the *presence*, the very *context* of one's own being? I am filled with foreboding at Nietzsche's act. I am not surprised those villagers turned away. He was unnatural, repulsive, mad. And at this accursed and lonely juncture Zarathustra's only recourse is to exemplify his solitude as the sacrifice of himself: effectively as madness and death. Thus, we humans may offer ourselves, albeit with some self-mockery and embarrassment, as exemplars of *possibility*. This is merely the realisation of our actual position in the ocean of unbridled energy. But the utter loneliness of it spawns the devil of psychosis. Failure to replace God compels us to madness, to the destruction of our faculties. Replace God? Who can escape their own skin? At least Nietzsche always admitted to himself that he was *human*. Three times he proposed to his idol Lou Salome, but she scorned sex, and took up with his best friend. 'Indispensable to the lover is his unrequited love, which he would at no price relinquish for a state of indifference!' Nietzsche said. Meanwhile he nursed his syphilis. The last sane thing he did was to cry out with pity at the lashing of a horse in a Turin marketplace. His life was cut short, his progress truncated. If he'd been born in other circumstances or had lived on, or had surrendered to mercy, time would have altered his absolutism. He had no chance to create a new cosmos, a new system. There's nothing new under the sun, and he would have repeated the ways of the old religions. Perhaps he suspected as much, and madness was his mercy, where he dodged the humility-horror of having to retract his steps, to efface the battles he'd fought, to descend from the mountain to the valley and live quietly and meekly there as if he'd never journeyed to the heights at all. To be an *ordinary* man, who accepted the transcendental subtle mercy of the infinite. Instead he suffered the horror visions of Arjuna, who when shown the unbridled infinitude of Being cried out in terror and abjectly begged for the protective mercy of his lord Krishna.

*Find your own way!* said Nietzsche. And suffering is the lot of we transitional beings, who live in becoming and being. At last we discover: *that all levels and experiences occur always and forever*, and that there is nothing but journeying even as we never journey at all. In the very thought of freedom lies our freedom, for who is the one who may think it? Only freedom knows itself, though even as it thinks it affirms its chains. A man dances with himself, may perish in utter snows, yet is always *with himself*. As a spider makes a web, a man makes himself. He cannot die, he is human, and thereby he is utterly god, since he sacrifices in all these valleys of ignorance, feels all the horrors of descent to madness - and therefore longs to resurrect himself, especially in a body of syphilitic bones called Friedrich Nietzsche. The sage Lao Tzu said: I entered the body of an illiterate chinese peasant, and even as an ascended master it took me twelve thousand years to perfect him! Take more time,



Mister Nietzsche. Live again, for your bravery is great, and may be enough. But don't do crazy next time. We tourists can't cope with the legend.

### **Beyond Good and Evil, What We Are is This**

I wish I had stood awhile with you in the house of Anne Frank (dear Marsha and Matty). From a finer world, the ghost of Anne shouts both joy and nightmare. The act of living is all there ever is! it says. I have been to the narrow house in the canal-side street in Amsterdam, seen the faked bookcase, narrow wood stair, secret annex rooms. Anyone who goes there will feel something like: 'There is nothing to lose. Rebel with all your might! The precious soul is hidden in plain sight!' Proof that this world is boundless, is righteousness living cheek by jowl with stupid evil, suffering cheek to cheek with happiness, inside cohabiting with outside, families keeping myriad secrets though they be but a hair's breadth apart, enduring in the same room and saying nothing of their secret thoughts. And we all know how private lovers enjoy in parallel universes of imagination. We know that aeons of time merely deliver us to a place where we began, that despite unspeakable vasts of space we are never anywhere but here, and that at the end of prayer and atonement, this moment (of sorrow) is all there ever is. For things truly here cannot be spoken of, things in plain sight cannot be seen, and only by rejected corners of the vision are we able to discern. Marsha, Matty, only in absence can we speak our truths. And they will only reveal to us when we turn to fiction. Our fiction shadows our reality, and we cannot dance our lives without it.

We fetishise the diary of a young girl called Anne Frank. We love her because we are not her, we shiveringly love her legend because we didn't have to live through it. Her diary can be sweet myth to us, and only by her myth do we love her. In this churning life of good and evil, truths bisect and thrust up lies. Is it not a great joke that the bludgeoning Nazis failed to find these Franks in their flimsy annex behind the bookcase? Is it not also a scandal how for years those Franks contaminated like sewer rats or cockroaches in a wall, the utopian clearness of the Nazi cause? The precious soul is hidden in plain sight, and precious life is sold for a song in the marketplace. Like eternity amid time, self beyond shadow, longing beyond aching present, clear reason above mental rubbish, wind in diseased lungs, hope amid death - Anne Frank exists in all of us. Alongside the Nazi. And we can try to stamp out the wind, spit out the years, wipe away all dust - but what we always are is *here*. Murder or be murdered, we are here, and will ever be, a thousand times into the ever-flung future. And there is no end to people's blundering belief in *living*. The reason? There is nothing else to ever do. The trivial is all of our days and hours, it is all of our breaths. Our little ego makes us believe in ourselves, despite our being only flotsam on swirling trade winds, shovelled to left and right, hoping to manage unswallowable things, claiming to *adapt*. Hiding is the refuge of we the living, for if we did not hide we'd cease to believe. Should we really fight to live when all must pass away? We clutch even at the thing that negates us, desiring to kill it, kill it! Even as Nazis kill hope, the fugitive hopes. Anne made

her scribble-trivia diary, and only when she *wrote* was there a forgetting, a nowness beyond all the forked things of life. Immortality, though fretted in an eternity of shudder-seconds, in fearful listenings and halted breaths, was all there could possibly be! Brutality was suddenly laughed away. Her acts proved there is no need to act, her living said there is no need to die. There is happiness only when we do not know a thing. Fear and loathing are surely here, but in the bitter-sweet living death that is *now*, is all eternity. Do not fear the trivia of moments, of breathing, of living on, for it is all we have. Trivia is greatness. This is what Anne Frank says.

### **Beyond Hope**

I write bundles of words to you, Marsha, but maybe lists of achievement are like our own death, trailing behind us like sewage from a leaking truck, or like this desert-western town where every facade or neon is a cry of loneliness. I should say goodbye to collections of projections: let them come and go like signage on a highway. Goodbye to myself then. Trivia is what I am, trivial as he who makes no decisions, who is not in command of wandering. Living death unfolds from my head as I wander these Arizona plains, scan a mirage of hills in sun desert at twilight. Trivia has no scale in this no-big no-small fractal life: no matter where we physically emotionally spiritually go, we find ourself here, warts and all. And pilgrimage is ridiculous. I go not to holy shrines: nothing is there but inconsequence and discomfort. The traveller carries all of life in his pack, all warts and fleas and lice and shit. His memories are as sifted lace, and history is nothing, certainly no science. Hold then to nothing. The more we judge, the more unintelligent, the more unconnected we are. Judging is death. Why do I send you photos without me in them? To be a hero unsung and unknown, to be martyred after endless trials? I want to be unlimited by judgements! By yours, by the hell of other people, the hell of myself. My wandering is just a snake river that shapes the canyon floor, is the wind that shapes a mesa, is sun worship that lets the sun rise each desert day in happiness. I am a quiet babble-wandering mind, I am continuity flowing nowhere and nowhere, out of no past into no future. I am nowness without perspective, nowness beyond dreaming or past or consequence. I am Siddhartha's river of mental exhalation, I am intuitive unfolding that leads to healing beyond my own intervention. Great letting: no search for the roots of neurosis, no slavery to results. My patience. This eternal is ever new.

Listen to the silence that swallows all things! What in you is worth preserving? You the etcetera, who vomits unassimilated things. How to deal with past, the enemy of *everness*? I shall breathe in and out, my breath is journey without arrival, and *no-arrival* must be journey's end. No more choosing to be done. Walk till you stop walking, breathe till you stop breathing, talk till you stop talking, cry till you stop crying. Yet there's no end to the power to conjure worlds. We are the press of past that regurgitates as present and future. We spreadeagle all our energy in a state of ignorance! How to gut karma, chop these tendrils of consequence? The divine helps those who help themselves: one day we

see we're responsible for nothing, but must continue to act as if we are. How to act cleanly? Surrender to responsibility, take responsibility for surrender! Wandering is subtle, we are not the doer, there is no location or boundary to the self. No wanting but to be rid of wanting. Nothing shall have any result... since we are no-one at all.

At all? Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud showed that ego will murder worlds to keep its phantom shape! - an absurdity since it has no actual place to exist. Ego is living death, a bobbing cork on a bulging sea, a penurious traffic policeman directing traffic in a chaotic megacity. It desperately evades the swallowing *id* by flourishing a mountain of *superego*. Who can judge me, put brakes on me? ego says, with my pillars of system, moralism, institute, ruling conscience, critic, foil, enemy, force of the father, perfectionism, religionism? The *Overman*, said Nietzsche. *Large and awful faces from beyond*, declared Hilaire Belloc! Ego needs to contain all nature, all biologic fact, all irrational ingrained inchoate chthonic welling up, all other, all *reckoning*. Or like a tiny fish in a great current, like a ghost-gate swinging in a desert wind it wants to stand, sustain its threadbare dignity. The tricks to divert unswallowed energy! (My Marta Pappen tale told how it fixates, denies, displaces, projects, rationalises, represses, sublimates, splits off, embraces aggressors, buries itself in altruism...) And we love this body-shell that expunges all the deep. And though we walk in self-conscioning narcissism and shame, I tell you we are always the *inexpressible heart*. Spread outward then, beyond planets, beyond suns, beyond the dark and light, beyond space and time, beyond pulsation, beyond hope, and fear of the shadow. Wander and blunder till you arrive at where you are.

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In Arizona desert state there's a little place called Hope. At the edge of Hope is a sign: *You are now beyond Hope*. They say the joke never fails. Miles down a silver strip of highway that bisects the desert sprawl nameless trailer parks, assuredly home to those who're beyond hope. I shudder at the thought and drive on: they don't represent my sophisticated brand of hopelessness. At a service station, a bunker in the dust under blue-dust sky, I ask a shrivelled old-timer in a cowboy hat if he 'knows some kind of hotel'. *You bet*, he says, and stands mournfully, filling his old bus of a car with gas. So I say, 'round here?' and get another 'you bet'. I ask another furtive question and sure am pleased to win my next 'you bet'. I get the feeling that if I asked all the questions a man can ask in a lifetime, the old-timer would make me wait till I'd grocked just how things oughta be round these parts, not how any goddam jumped-up cattle-rustlin' stranger like me thinks they oughta be, but how things are fer an old-timer who oughta know, 'cause it takes a fella a *lifetime* to know just how things gotta be. Just ask the old-timer, you bet! He shuffles away to pay his leathery bucks to the teller and I wonder how insanely insular a man can be, incarcerated in this immensity of open nothingness, in the blithe spaces of this desert, the blue empty vaults of sky over his head, the mean nothingness of a life that is forever behind him.

Later, a *Best Western* sign pops out of the desert hills with an absurd yellow greeting. I park up my springy rental in the lot, just as some ten-gallon old-timers and their wives exit their autos and drift with ghostly deliberation toward the big yellow sign as if in a slow motion bow-legged dance, or like horses moseying after a nosebag. That ole country music drifts over with a forever promise. Inside are rooms with tap-bars and chromed bottle racks and soft light where scattered folks on stools and at tables bend over steaks and beers. Folks here are affable-friendly, beer in hand and ready for a little chat as they drawl their lilting affirmation or polite surprise at miniature things in other folks' lives, lives that never happen except as slow consequence of slow things, ritualised in acceptable cosy repeatable halls of memory. And that ole music wafts down the corridor, and a band of old youngsters renews the lost promise of old times for the check-shirt corpses and ghosts in the parloured rooms of this big yeller pleasure ranch in the Utah hills, here in the desert of canyons and cactus and a glazed sunset sky streaked over a nameless prairie. And the dead centre of living vibrates softly, as it does forever. This is the sleep of being, and these sweet folks sleep and enjoy their way through time, all of their days.

Those traveller folks who first set eyes on the Grand Canyon must've had the thrill of their lives. The great gorge is such that you come to the lip of it without warning, and there's a moment when you can't take in the fact of it, and it doesn't fail to make your heart skip a beat. It's a damn fine sort of flooding feeling. How its great shimmering buttresses got to be named after Hindu gods in this westy wild of America is beyond me, but their naming is terribly apt. A person is suddenly made to feel... strangely connected to life, to everything, and there is a peace and wonder, and forgetting of yourself for a little time. And as he stands there (and if he cares) the visitor begins to feel as if he were a sort of mere thought, a dust mote even; and just then there's a rustle of wind, and now he is *that*... and now he is the imprint of a tiny snake in the sand at his feet or the sudden-revealed bone of a creature in a dune, or a polished stone under the wind, or an insect in the noonday of a long-dead summer, a grass reed, the feather-flicker of a sky bird dipping over the canyon wall far away, or a flurry of water tossed in that prehistoric snake river far below... Here is time revealed as painting, as accomplishment; and he thinks of the aeons it took to wear away all this rock and sand, and how the brown snake of the Colorado river winding six thousand feet below is, as we stand here and breathe, forever making and shaping its thousand mile corridor to the sea.

On the way to the Canyon, I'd stepped out of the car on a lonely stretch between two forests, wanting to do yoga and breathe clear air. I stood mesmerised by smooth white conical peaks rising out of the high plateau. After a minute a car, pin-prick at first then a shimmer in the haze, wells up into a bulge of metal and flashy light. A gun-belted cop steps out of it and swaggers across the road. Polite, he asks what I'm doin' outsid' my car. I have a little think about this, then explain that I am from overseas, and that I assumed National Parks were places where people came to take the air and walk

abroad. He soon puts me right on that score. Folks are not authorised to leave their vee-hicles, he drawls, until they get to The Parking Lot at the Canyon. And that is twenty miles thataway, he adds helpfully. I have a bit of a look at him, then turn and look at all those high Sierras under the blue vault of winter sky, and at that spreading million-year plateau, at the furred arms of the round green trees eyeing us in the silence, and at a lone hawk circling above our heads across the glaze-yellow mirror of the sun... and I breathe a larger breath than usual, hoping the policeman might notice. Okay then! Have a great great day, I say, then dive into my car and pull out. And he car-stalks me for a while before abruptly swerving aside in a sudden violent turn, in an important slew of graveldust back the way he's come, to attend to some other grim trivia in the little nut of his life. And subject to all these puny-reasoned paranoid laws, I am made to feel if not a felon, then a fool at least. Right there it feels wrong to be alive, in the land of the free, in America.

There are places in Arizona state where no-one in their right mind would think of planting a town, except Americans. And people go for holidays in places you wouldn't believe a holiday could be had. I think it's all about routine, about safety and identity - and a counterpoint to a lonely pioneering spirit. If we can get a Starbucks in every goddam hamlet of this wide country, that's success. Drink to it! If Arizona dust doesn't choke you up first. The imprint of people on a desert world is phantom at best. The desert shrugs us away, and the image of a cow's skull in a dune or the discarded clothes of a Mexican border jumper, or the ghosts of depression-fleeing dust-choked Okies or a rust-eaten motel sign swinging in the wind, will be all that's left when memory discards this featureless world. Kites wheel in the sand-blue sky, croaked bushes on the mesas moan lonely, beating winds slew away our footprints and tyre tracks. But still, the big blue ladle of sky above our heads offers soul food for all. Hope is what we have here, in spades!

I get to Yuma, the desert town where they used to shoot westerns, and pull up late in the day at the House of Yoga, an establishment on the outskirts ringed about by square allotments half-strewn with rusting holiday trailers and walls of industrial pallets. A no man's land, a camp. The jerry-built yoga building sports an impressive neon sign on its roof that flashes and fizzes jerkily. YO-GA YO-GA, it says to the quizzical crows in the nearby brownfields and to lone drivers heading home along the dust road outside town. But it speaks to me: of the quiet spirit of enterprise and never-say-die, not least of the little Tamil Indian man whom I've come to see, who took up the spirit of America and wanted to offer balm and healing to its citizens, who in their turn had come to far-flung Arizona to breathe its air, to clear their sinuses and bathe in healing sun under blue blue sky. And the little Tamil is ready to help them do it. I feel weirdly at home in this implausible place with its poor shack house and its chicken wire and dusty yard. And when I see the strange Hindu temples the yogi has built at back, I am moved to wonder at the almost crazy vision and pioneering zeal of all desert people, how human beings live and hope in a place without comfort, with nothing but the sky to remind them they are

nothing, that their ant lives pass unregarded even by the moaning wind, by the drowning hard light or by the dust, dust, dust drifting into their eyes across borderless plains.

The bigger temple comprises an aqua-blue concrete square, a roof of garish red, and a great horizon-scanning eye embedded in its apex. Inside are rows of black basalt figures on plinths, ancient gods ranged in a sacred circle, with images of sages on the dark walls above. The temple's heavy-carved doors give way to an unfathomed interior silence, and oil candles flicker in the gloom. These startling statues of basalt are said to last five thousand years. Certainly longer than *Ozymandias*, and far far longer than the building. In the little temple behind, of a homely green, is a little space for a mausoleum, and the yogi has instructed his people to one day inter him there. Between the two buildings are deep ponds in the shape of the feet of a god, in which a colony of tiny fish swim about. I am told these are the living disciples of a great sage who took the body of a fish. A few hardy people have put their love and devotion into these fixtures. I am standing by the pond when an old check-shirted feller in a cowboy hat leans over the next door fence and calls out: 'Ah remember when them mosques were built, all them yeers ago. Caused quite a helluva stir to folks round here, yessir.' I don't feel like correcting his concept of a 'mosque', but ask if he himself lives there. 'Hell no, I been comin' down here from Nebraska fer nigh on thirty years, fer mah vacation. Me and muh wife that is. But I tell ya, them mosques, ya kinda get used to 'em. I remember that yogi feller invitin' us all in one day, and hell if it weren't the dangedest thing, all them black statyers! We bein' Christians an' all. Kinda 'preciate 'em now, after all these yeers. Yessir, reeligious toleration, that's what we need down heer.' And I realise he wants and needs to welcome me to *his* land, and let me know just how things are around these parts. And I fall to wondering how a man could drag his family to this god-forsaken parched dustbowl of a trailer park in the middle of nowhere for all these years, for his *vacation*... At this little moment, I think I understand America.

The house itself is a tumbledown wooden affair, with caravans for the yogi's attendants, the whole caked in a film of dust as deep as your finger, and for running water a sort of viscous brown sludge, gurgling in from under the furrowed and poisoned fields. The yogi's helper is a black fellow who lives out of a tiny van and who works year in year out as an orderly at the local hospital, tending the master whenever he visits from faraway India. One day I accompany these two to the post office, dressed in *dhotis* both, the wiry little Indian and the thin bespectacled African, enwrapped with their sacred beads, great dreadlocks held in buns high on their heads and flip-flops on their brown feet. They stand in the parcel office in front of several burly uniformed heavy-stomached Americans, one a gun-toting cop, and I wonder what on earth is going through the minds of these staunch upholders of the American way. *Freaks, terrorists, hobos, illegals, wackos?* All of the above, and yet I can feel them needing to *justify* the presence of these aliens; these stiff-hearted pillars of the community with their rock-solid roles in their deep conformist American land, are dutifully struggling to have good-

hearted American thoughts... and so we have all the 'howdys' and 'sure thing fellers' and 'have a great day guys' flying about during the little transaction in the parcel office in this fucking desert at the end of the world, and it is as if every single one of them can feel in their hearts how we are all ghosts, all straw men, all strangers in Being, weird glomerations of imposed culture in a desert world where none of us fit. And that is why the little Indian yogi came here and built his temples in this far-flung country. He is a subtle man! He knows too well, that when all is said and done and dead and gone, that the only thing left is the spirit, and it wanders alone and silent in prairies and hills and fields forever, under the stripping sky. It has no human qualities at all. Surrender to the sky your fitful narrow hearts, it says. Don't fool yourselves! For the son of man hath not where to rest his head... We are campers in this world. Wanderers all.'

### **Factory for Dogs**

All ragged souls, Marsha. I bang on to you about psychic imbalance, how the fight for dignity and respect swings wildly between victim and persecutor. I know how you spruik the rebel, the Warrior, and believe me, I worship it in you. So why does your pet anarchist seem to oscillate to totalitarian puritanical conservatism? You joined the army after all, and I daresay you wanted to get what your father never gave you. My story of Marine the Parisian traitor (if you read my letters) said we can't really be anarchists since we want to belong to something, a manoeuvre that requires us to dine with all our dirty shadows. The next story, while entertaining, touches a nerve for me. Where's the real war but a continual fight for honesty? Our superego erects a vision of conscience against the ignominious crush of bloody rat-race exploitation, fight to eat, fight to tell yourself you need to go on; while the groaning past, collective unconscious of a race, burden of history, cloying inertia of old ways, price we pay for living, turn us into victims and pawns. Should we be the ragged fool who cries for dignity yet continually slithers away (me) - or should we stand and fight and die *in the dignity of our indignity*? Write to me, Marsha. PS: Send this to Matty.

'London is the loneliest city. Ghosts from the pages of Dickens still haunt the English metropolis. Back alley exploitation festers as it did, brown-brick buildings moulder in brackish wintry air, cold shadows linger about black-iron graveyard gates and church spires, under lead-blue sky. Lean centuries roll, and we peer into time and hope things will be different. But time is lodged in our bones, and the city mooches on like an old beaten dog: the crafty money-actors come and go, the ruddy baker in his foggy shop takes a lump of dough and moulds it for lean men's stomachs that will never be filled, since their dreams of betterment are never done, and need and want ever coalesce to the same shapes, just shredded and chewed under the tick of grinding time.

I took a job of sorts, one that should be beneath me but that I want to be part of because it means 'entering a web of old'. Solidarity with the quotidian loneliness of people with dim prospects, smell of

oily rag, crumbcake in pocket, proud ranks of poverty. Romantic, but only for one's grandkids. Not been in England long and feeling like an ingenue, thrust out of home country and worryingly lacking any zeal to make my way. A trustable acquaintance suggests I go and meet the manager of a dodgy company he recently resigned from. I remember buying for eight quid an absurd pair of zip-boots in faux fur, hoping this to be suitable for the coming winter, but which made me feel even more disconnected or shamed or some ignominious thing. On a deep-cold morning I find myself at the door of a workshop down an alley behind dirty warehouses in the Kilburn district. Inside, a feller is spraying welcome mats. He grins slightly inanely at me from behind a cloud of black film, says *welcome to paradise* and holds up his handiwork on which is scribed exactly that. He is not slow to inform me his name is Toby and he used to work for the Post Office but got himself 'sorted' (ha ha) and now's down 'ere spraying mats in this icy room stuffed wiv shitty bales of stuff from a smelly 'ot place full of wogs called India. Right. I watch him daub his mat like a child who trying to express his complexed inner guff ruins his creation with progressively more stupid colour combinations. As the morning slips by I learn he is in fact a terrific (racist) comedian who can expostulate on the shithouse state of the world outside his door till the (sacred) cows come home. There's more than a whiff of pathos since his gossipy faux-ironic desperation leaks out and repels. Everybody to him is some special kind of 'shitbaag'. (I don't assume the fact he's confiding in me means I'm exempt) Such venomous denunciations are in direct proportion to his furious self-denial in wishing he were safely sconced back at post office HQ. I shudder inwardly. Meanwhile I wonder what's to be done round here apart from letting black toxins turn me as loony as Toby. The phone rings and on the line is Anthony Ghoul, the owner and a Hampstead entrepreneur, an extraordinarily positive fellow who I learn greets one's every comment with *Yah, brill!* then grinningly persuades you to do whatever shite he wants. Down the alley, I'm informed, is a garage with a clever big machine in it that deposits little polystyrene balls into 'doggy beds'. Designed it himself, did Anthony. He affirms how his *yah brill* beds have personal doggy names on them, all hand-embroidered at his *yah brill* factory in Kentish Town and apparently advertised in the best sunday papers. Suitably steeped in yah brill rhetoric I hurry to the place. The infernal machine is ingeniously installed on two levels, where sacks of white balls are fed into chutes and tumble downstairs to a filling area where stacks of doggy beds are plumped and zipped for delivery, no doubt to hordes of tweedy country folk with doggies and pussies who eagerly perused one's ads in the *Sunday Times* and *Observer* of a weekend yah. The garage is a nightmare little kingdom, and I discover it is quite possible to disappear entirely in a sticky polystyrene white-out. On his own is a rangy blonde-bearded tall guy known as Madd who, covered from head to foot in little balls, is currently entertaining himself by (expertly) playing two penny flutes at once. He is scarily keen to show me round the Ugly Machine as if he personally invented it, and I soon see his excoriating discourse on this device as symbol of satanic mill class iniquities of old England etc, marks him out as public school. How did he find himself here at Anthony Ghoul and Co? 'Truth is chap, one carries the sad burden of being an *artist*. Boss Anthony clearly imagines such as



me will add cachet to his grungy enterprise.' I pick him quick as one of those brilliant English types who are perpetually in rehearsal for something great that never happens, and so ingeniously frothy is their irony that the border between highwire brilliancy and self-stabbing depths is perpetually undefined. Later I visualise the tall two of them, Madd and Anthony, standing eye to eye in the office, jawing with seeping irony on all refined things and skirting the grotty fact that Madd is to be employed at two quid an hour to turn up of a foggy morning or in middle of night to unload some truck from Glasgow or wherever his honey-lipped proprietor has managed to secure toxic materials at cut prices to be shoved into soggy brown sacks that the rich and snooty can sport their doggies on by their agars in the splendid parlours of England. And *still* Madd averts his eye and numbs his subtle brain to the exploitation of his soul. In turn it's he who recruited Kath, a tattooed and studded goth newly arrived from oop north, maybe Hull (he judges) and whom Madd will in a matter of days avengingly take to his bed. She won't complain because her type quite appreciates being poked by nice toffs like Madd as opposed to shirty toffs like that fey wanker Ant the Proprietor. Kath thinks she's superior, having come from oop north where we all keep our copper-bottomed dignity with our tatts and our weed cigarettes and our pints and our clever lippy lip. She who after presumably rolling out of bed turns up at lunchtime innit, is decked out in what Madd informs is a lately underexploited punk-eclectic fashion nuance of British pop culture developed by Kath to ultra-grunge micro-perfection. Wonderful thing about this country is how every little cell and subset of culture has aficionados like this. An artiste and no irony, all about pride and dignity. Madd informs us that current doggy company turns out to be full of people from somewhere else (like London always is) and smooth Anthony Ghoul with his upper-class townhouse on the hill is so *yah yah brill* riding his high horse like some insouciant circus master with his absolute *plethora* of ideas for making dough out of bourgeois nongs such as his own grandmother, that requires no possible skill except the kindly services of ad hoc misfits like us three who need to put food in our mouths for a week or two. Most of North London's gutter intelligentsia will end up working here as long as Ghoul's absurd higgledy-piggledy enterprise totters on. The *piece de resistance*, all agree, is surely his miniature Doggy Gravestones (in best fake granite) closely followed by his Doggy Toilets which consist of a serrated plastic bucket with no bottom, a poop-scoop and half a hundredweight of bottled chemical guaranteed to murder all worms within three-metre radius of said potty site. Simply pop pooch on his lawn potty and let chemicals do the business. Brill! (Anthony Ghoul is really a fence since he wouldn't be such a fool as to make this kind of stuff.) Thus in our snowy garage Madd and Kath entertain themselves mightily with much sneering banter. Floor manager at the big site in Kentish Town is dwarfish-hairy and begoggled Chad, who like Mutley the Dog is heard to mutter *racism fascism* under his breath to pass the hours, all the while fooling himself (says Madd) that he has the measure of that rangy toff Ant Ghoul. Chad thinks he perfected genteel class warfare since he's ironical enough to make money out of Anthony's ridiculous business. Trouble is, class war is taking its toll since Chad is getting worked to the bone. All he can do is push emotional and physical shit down the line onto the rest of us.

I discover this is true when (I am the only mug in Kilburn branch who answers the phone) Chad gets on the blower eight times a day invoking a stream of undoable deadlines. By and by though, he and I strike up a sort of breathy-desperate phone camaraderie, and Chad now concludes he ‘needs my support’ and since I’m suddenly ‘foreman of the branch’ (dubious honour) for a couple of quid payrise yeah (executive decision) he can now shovel all his stress and bile on me. Which unfortunately we know good managers should not do. Later at the pub when I foolishly josh him about it he acts as if he has no clue what I mean. I glean that he can’t stand the stab at his self-esteem the job demands, and he covers it with steely-stoic working class grimness punctuated at moments by bursts of ironic laughter into his treacly pint. And herein I see the disease of Anthony Ghoul and Co: the eating of self-esteem, the wanting of work to mean something and knowing it doesn’t, how we all demand to be alternative lifestylers but secretly envy the mainstream world safely sconced in its warm-fogged offices and aspiration to be middle class. Our ironised theatre of want, in the here-today-gone-tomorrer underling underbelly of a great city. No better example than Jade the Van Man, with his ‘one deliv’ry for the company and one for meself’ hyperactive slick babble talk and nose for the main chance, hiding his lowness under incessant promotion of all the sharpish businesses he’s gonna start, which all sound suspiciously like this one. Ah well, ‘e’s master of the company van and that’s Status. Everybody is always cursin’ everyfink, mumbling about being somewhere else, moving on to somewhere better, automatically mistrusting but envying the boss, getting on first-name basis with him in his grubby mezzanine office and asking for a ‘payrise like’ and not getting it ‘cos Ant is ‘already down and dirty wiv the working class and doin’ it tough to provide jobs for the dole queue boys’. And all of *them* are claiming to be far too intelligent to be viewed as mere workers and Anthony’s telling ‘em that’s so, and the vibe is like ‘no discipline no hierarchy man’ but if you wanna like fuck off there’s the door. Ant’s so hip, his dwarfy man Chad is hip, everyone is hip. But all we desperate black-clad Withnails are bone-chilled within. In a corner of the Kentish Town building is our company’ accountant’, sconced in a hovel of boxes and papers that spiral Dr. Seuss-like up to the ceiling. And fuck me, he’s the spitting epitome of Dickensian thin man, all spidery legs and no torso, all nose and no face and lank bony-fingered slow irksome demeanour, descendant of all scribbler clerks of centuries past, another very ‘umble rank amateur our Ant easily convinced to do his murky number-fiddling. And he reminds me, as in all my wanderings about this big sad city, of horrid institutional English faux glory and Ship Empires and class division and factory warehouses and oily river fog and mud and low rent Dickensian streets and brown-cold walls and smoky alleys and snotty wee boys running after rich-clad bankers in toppers under the great white pillars of establishment. It’s a city of ghosts. I’m part of it.

Chad one icy-damp morning turns up at Kilburn in one of his dense moods, all moochy and strangled, and out of nowhere the rangy bearded Madd who just lost some gig with someone famous tells him to fuck off since he’s in no mood to be ‘dictated to in corporatey uptight tones’ - so his makeshift

rollercoaster of a job finally pushes Chaddo to ignominious end of tether and fogs up his thick glasses and he starts to burble and scream and tries to punch out our six-foot-four blonde mate right in the alleyway. Red faces and shouts and hot breath condense in the cold air, and Madd is suddenly away and gone. I bring Chad inside and want to give him a pat, poor feller, but he's too liverishly lost, and he storms back to his Kentish Town office to brood and growl and lick his fingers. Later that day I hear he resigned. Sad because Madd was originally his mate. And Toby the oiky mat spray man has a good ole laugh and dubs them all *shitbaaags*. It's now clear Chad was no master of himself, just another exploitee of boss Anthony's crafty flattery, little short man with too many brains. Too soft, not evil enough. No match for smooth Ant grinning at him from his swivel chair.

Our attention's soon diverted by the appearance of Nick the Stitch, coke-snorting little Tailor in fingerless mittens and WW2 bomber jacket who rents a space above our doggy shed. Right now he's cursin' and spitting terbaccer out of his teeth 'cos *The 'Arrods Buyers are coming!* - and this is suddenly the biggest thing in his career since he went out on his own like, and he 'as to get his premises fixed and needs our fuckin' help sharpish. Harrods? We pile sharpish up to his floor and he throws hammers and spraycans at us and we're literally chucking shit out of windows into alleys and backyards and Nick is literally spray-painting the chairs these Harrods bums are gonna park on and they're here in two fuckin' hours and it's a fuckin' emergency mate. He drapes his bits of silk and slushy satin and tartan 'ere and there and hither and yon, and it's all fuckin' artistic and modish and ironic. Myself, having bought some furry lump of a jacket from him with a huge yellow photo of Stalin sewed to the inside for fifty quid and regretting it 'cos it's so ignominiously proletarian, now wonder how on earth he managed to get Harrods to take him seriously enough to come all the way down to his hovel in the Kilburn alleys... And when they do arrive, just as we've chucked the last of his corpsed boxes and cheapy shit out the upper window, and as the hip young man and hip young woman tool up his miniscule stairs and are desperately nonchalantly ushered in and offered those tacky-wet glossy black seats in that poky little office, I note the tell-tale disbelieving grins and know there and then they won't commission him or buy any of his bits, but will certainly dine out on the story of their exploit within the London nether world for weeks after, with their bourgie friends in their chi-chi frou-frou Kensington wine bars. And I feel an itch for Nick the Stitch, lippy chainsmoking coke-snorting little self-promoter with a career as calumniated and cock-eyed as his potty tongue and his temper, who nevertheless with his tailor fingers knows how to twist illusions out of cloth and thrust 'em under noses of experts and con them to take him seriously for one hour of his life. Go Nick! Afterwards we all repair to his smoke-licked gloomy pub down the road, and over Guinness listen to the Stitch wind his motors down into a post mortem mix of dodgy-eyed muttering and chin-jutting self-enwrapment segueing to spitty-ironic airy dismissal of those wankers from 'arrods who [might have made his career but] failed to have anyfink like the needed vision to come to

the party wiv Nick the Stitch from Kilburn. Anyways, he exited our premises after that, and god knows where he went.

I need to also mention a pock-faced shopgirl called Margie or Marcie, sent down from the Kentish Town mothership to work for me in my snowy rooms of polystyrene. I wanted straight away to be kind to her in the way of magnanimous nineteenth-century landlord who patronises his slum tenants so he can bask in the idea that they think him a real gent and a good sort. I'd thank her for every little job, and again at the end of a day's grungy work, and she'd say thank you back 'cause no-one ever thanked her for doing an actual job of work. And I wondered if she'd ever get to go out with a boy or get a husband or be anyone at all besides a dull-ugly fatty-spotty dutiful daughter who'll work in the bins of London forever and never have the wherewithal to be or do anything but. But I mythologise, because to Margie my sentiment would be bullshit. This is her reality, not pathetic at all. Still, she cops a ton of withering lip from an acquaintance of mine from the colonies called Chris Mass who's commandeered the Cockney sharp talk as if he's born to it, and whose chosen tool of communication is 'withering put-down' honed to cover the dismay that an intellectual like him finds himself in this London hell hole. Meanwhile Margie blushes pink. In fact it was him who got me the job and who on day one laughed heartlessly at my woolly boots. Now I see he recruited me 'cos he thought 'here's a patrician wanker who deserves to be pulled down to the level that I in my ironic slumming it am noble enough to endure.' Anyway, he in the end demanded I play him in a chess face-off, a battle of wits like, and after I'd kicked his arse four times in a row (which surprised me no end) he never associated with me again. It's all about Dignity, see.

Any rate, our green-and-white-stripe shirted Anthony Ghoul in the end is forced to 'scale down operations', 'diversify to other ventures', 'segue to more productive platforms in a change economy' blaahaa, and so my three-month doggy miasma dribbles to an end. I feel as if by dint of his crummy dodgy venture peopled by various improvising desperados trying to fend off being the victims that bottom-feeding never-never capitalism makes them, that I'd wandered right into the oily engine room of English capitalism and class, even re-lived the ghosts of Dickens here in the back alleys of the great city. As I said, nothing ever changes in this murky world. And here am I making the experience into a myth. But I can't help it, because it was just like that.'

### **Value Beyond Pessimism**

At the risk of boring you rigid, have I shown at least one value in wandering: the steady assassination of our fixations, our fundamentalisms? Marsha? How in East Berlin I painted the totalitarian state as nothing but a floundering hysteric superego, my proof that freedom is the business of the individual, for whom all collectivisms are Godzilla projections that return and trample us, even while the ego holds us in its cementing grip. The Polish philosopher Kolakowski wrote in a 1971 essay *In Stalin's*

*Countries: Theses on Hope and Despair*, that self-organized social groups could covertly expand the ‘spheres of civil society’, thereby cracking the stranglehold of totalitarian states. His ideas helped inspire the 1970s dissident movements that led to *Solidarity*, the famed trade union movement, and eventually to the collapse of Communism in Europe. Succumbing to the myth of ‘unstoppable urges to freedom’ I made a mini-pilgrimage to Gdansk, birthplace of *Solidarity*. Myths are the very definition of goneness, no matter that they are revived by sops like me. Like a fire that must consume itself, the *Solidarity* myth has merged with the vacuous hoping and wanting of the traveller Blank. Nor do places have any meaning beyond the ogling of them by dilettante dissidents like me, in this case Gdansk’s old trading town, which is apparently ‘painstakingly-restored yet cleansed of all trace of Prussian barbarism’. In the midst of this museum I find myself standing at the house of the philosopher and great curmudgeon Arthur Schopenhauer. I always recalled that the reclusive Schopenhauer loved the *Upanishads*, that great work that shouts out liberation. It is a private beacon of my own. He called its hymns nectar, balm to the soul, since the man was a pessimist, which I cannot possibly blame him for since he was a corruscatingly honest soul. Said he: if everything is utterly swept away, and forever, and there is no choice but to be utterly *conscious* of it always: this is surely hell, hell unending, and there is no liberation to be had.

How then to attack the core contradiction of our existence? Bear with me, I need to explain it! First, we posit an eternal emptiness where absolutely nothing ever changes. Second, we posit infinite possibility driven by eternal force, where all worlds and forms manifest in pulsation, resulting in permanent displacement. This latter is called *Samsara*, force of desire, ever hoping, ever becoming, ever wandering, ever insecure, ever inconclusive. Further, it is convincingly said that ‘that which changes’ cannot ever be itself, and therefore can literally have no value. But surely in *Samsara*’s eternal pulsation, all must have its ‘use and purpose’, however ephemeral? One argument for this lies in the fact that ‘nothing can be missing from the Absolute’. We thereby affirm that value lies in ‘the Absolute fulfilling its uses and purposes’, whether we understand them or not. A brave positive vision! Next, we must ask: *who is it* that claims that since things continuously change and disappear, that there is no ultimate value? It is precisely the seer of all phenomena. Is there anyone else? Certainly not. Further, he who decides whether something is real or unreal obviously knows himself to be real. Why then, we disingenuously ask, should the seer be any kind of pessimist, and hence a sufferer? Is it because the pulsation, the becoming (*Samsara*) is an eternally recurring condition of limitation, ignorance and self-estrangement, whereby our understanding is clouded, cropped, tenuous? There is no alternative but yes. What stays then? It is clearly the one who is ever himself, the aware one, the seer. Yet he is expert at masking himself! And life seems tremendously tough! I myself hang by a thread to the hope of understanding... and yet *here I am*, and I am whole, for without being whole how could I ever experience fragmentation? Likewise, the one who is whole can by definition never suffer. Yet he who believes he is partial, he who is fragmented, will suffer. He is fragmented as

pulsation, displacement, as atom and word and time and space, as a vortex of eternal repulsion and attraction. He is led to the notion that life will always be both meaningful and meaningless, both valuable and valueless. He asks: what hope of attainment, freedom, peace? Yet he who thus debates, obviously knows himself to be real, otherwise he would not be interested in or qualified to make such judgements about reality and unreality, wholeness and fragmentation. Who in the end assigns meaning and meaninglessness, value and valuelessness? Who conducts the polemic? It is *you*. Absolute *you*. Therefore *you* may free yourself of your habit of feeling hopeless... But again arises the power of the veil, in the form of doubt! - where shiftless *Samsara*, in its restless seeking, again raises the spectre, the demon, of hope and its destruction.

Listen again. The philosopher Schopenhauer takes a pessimistic view that is born of lack of control, of a feeling that by being utterly immersed *in and as being* we are utterly dependent, that the totality (the id) 'wipes us out'. Yet should we lament our absolute Being? *We are* the Being, and in Us there is only the will to create, the pulsation, the *experience*. Force and counterforce exists within us alone. Thereby, to say we are dependent suggests we are somehow independent, since we have absolute power to feel and to experience and to suffer! Why then does Schopenhauer feel that 'will is the eternal repetition of ignorance', that there can be no evolution toward liberation? Consider: if there were no such evolution, how could the self envision any 'gradations of life'? We have already come a long long way to be given human form! The Seer obviously accepts desire, within his eternal psyche. And though human suffering may seem exquisite (such is our advanced narcissism) our power to remove it is surely equal to the need to do so; this is the law of compensation. Nietzsche affirmed how philosophy is conjured out of *need*, where human will is the force of striving for better, and here is the very cud of the idea of evolving. But where ego is, there will always be pessimism. Why? We feel the very preciousness of the self, and we express it as ego, which, since it is the need to immerse and die in all the delights and forms of the world, is always helpless. We really cannot ever let go of this. We are romantics, we are in love with experiences and people and things... But finally and ironically, pessimistic Schopenhauer was right: there is no evolution, thank god! Evolution is a narrative, and narrative is *desire*, and it ends, ceases to exist, when it is no longer needed. When will this be? People speak of detachment from desire, the end of the need to wait, the end of waiting in *time*, the end of belief in thought as anything but thought, the end of belief in, and slavery to, any particular feeling. Instead, there is a singular and absolute attitude to life expressed as 'utterly unchangeable and therefore empty' which in fact is the possibility of an all-encompassing love. This attitude is simply and merely the *recognition* of our total and utter identity with Absolute. Here and Now, this Vishnu, this renewal, this presence, this mercy, alone is the death of pessimism. Enquire into pessimism, Mister Schopenhauer! Do it a million times if you have to, but always you will come back to the sole problem: *who* is the enquirer into the so-called problem? It is *you*. And you are all that there ever is.

And when we actually *see* pessimism for what it is, at that moment we are not pessimistic. Let that moment repeat itself, and rule you. No seer of the truth can ever be pessimistic.

As usual M, thanks for your (imagined) attention.

### **Footprints in the Sand**

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose...* The more things change the more they are the same. And there are no narratives but old ones, beguiling tales that let us postpone and sleep, dodge the slithery present, hide from the real. We know that karma is the great soap opera, oiled by endless psychological contortions. Look at our effort in the present journal, delving into past in order to knit up these strands of karmic connection! At least we know the past is never gone; it isn't even past. And when will we get that the holy past wasn't ever anything but the aching present? When will we see that by fixating, by fossilising past, by *mythmaking*, we build a cage for ourselves we can't ever escape?

Tourists are nothing if not myth-and-legend junkies, jumpers on bandwagons, wide-eyed wanters of what others are supposed to have had. Blank the wanderer, like all tourists, is drawn to the Holy Land by some power of myth cooked up over centuries. 'But what is a 'holy land' (he writes) where more bloody wars have been fought over the place than almost anywhere? A place is not sanctified unless a mass of complementary energy has been poured into it. Think of churches, mosques, synagogues. Palestine should by rights be sanctified by violence. But what is a 'place' where so many footprints, so many conflicting stories have stomped through it, traced it over? In this way, time erases place. Is 'significance of place' not simply a notion of the experiencer, and, since even sanctified places are limited to the visitor's power to absorb, quietly erased when he passes on? Does anything stick? Well, the natives claim so (they wouldn't be here otherwise) and they fight and worship over it in equal parts. And thus the moth-like tourists come. The real myth of Palestine is this: it has been designated an exquisite stage set for humanity's miseries and transcendent hopes. The endless battle for right versus wrong! What a farce, since they say even so-called evil people act according to what they think is right, and one man's meat is another man's poison, and only in a narrative called morality is evil able to exist. And I suppose if all energy is seen as utterly positive, then by this argument all is *holy*. Therein there can be no right or wrong acts, only *decisions*. This amorality argument, this stepping outside of the problem, is possibly how I seek to justify my acts in regard to you, Marsha. (And I know how you respond to the amorality of anarchism.) Anyway let's not flog it, since we flog ourselves. And Matty will be bored.



I joined a tour out of Jerusalem headed for the Dead Sea and the ancient Jewish fortress of Masada. The tour operator was a rabbi, the local rubbery term for ‘teacher’. He’d called his business *Burning Bush Tours*, presumably cashing in on Moses’ revelations on Mount Sinai. Our rabbi was a modern-day zealot spruiking his country’s history under the convenient banner of a tour company. In fact he was unable to stop talking for the whole day, not about the wonders we beheld in front of us, but about the virtues of *yesterday’s* tour which according to him we must undoubtedly do *tomorrow* since it takes its customers literally from one end of his country to the other and that that meant one could literally cover every inch of the holy land in a single day - a great and brilliant deal if ever there was one. It was the babblingly upbeat positivist tone of this big-bearded messy tee-shirted sad-eyed young rabbi that affected me, as if he were trying to convince himself of his own success, that his Jewish state was a success, and that it was a great and wonderful thing to be a jew and rabbi and entrepreneur all rolled into one - so that making money out of the sacred business of educating the world about jewishness should be recognised as the pinnacle of the enormously important fact of being jewish. But his impatience with himself, his need to transcend the pesky nowness of being, to get to the next hour and to tomorrow and beyond, showed a soul so restless with the business of selling ancient tradition inside the petty fanfares of today, that he was a parody of the things he somehow, somewhere, wanted to believe in. In fact his refusal to question himself had made him so; his faith had pickled him in his own juices. And he was only a rabbi because he wasn’t a fishmonger or a roadmender or a piemaker or a banker or a bus driver or a T-shirt vendor. The truth is he was a modern day wanderer in his own



land, in his tiny desert land, and he was busy drilling into its very sands the proper thoughts, the right narratives... and those shifty much-pummelled sands gasped dryly since they couldn't take any more *significance*, any more weighty narratives about the historic wanderings of sandalled legendary ancestors. And this country is the repository of too many stories that contradicted the rabbi's own: Roman, Muslim, Christian, Turkish, Palestinian, British, not to mention Jew pitted against Jew. And now in present time his modern-ancient country is turning its sand to concrete, draining the sacred Jordan, sucking the hidden waters out of the land, building skeletal lonely towns for wide-eyed settlers in the middle of deserts while it grapples with its own crazy fundamentalist nuisances, jewish and otherwise, and builds walls to keep its neighbours out yet lets them labour in erecting its wondrous settlements, blocks up their roads in the name of holy security, burns their olive groves and bombs them to submission - as it furiously and studiously bludgeons out the latest greatest chapter in its not-so-glorious holy land story.

And so we come to the fortress of Masada that stands above a sea so alive with legend it's stone dead, and while we stand staring at the white mirage of the Jordanian hills and hear of the *Sicariis*' heroic resistance against the Roman oppressor... by this time we know only that we're hot and want drinks and are exhausted and our ears are oppressed and want silence - but our man-for-all-seasons rabbi produces the answer to our prayers! We are taken to a spring in a cleft in stony hills above the mud-dead sea. And even at this miraculously simple cool spring, the famous place in fact where the future great King David hid away from evil King Solomon two thousand five hundred years ago, even as we throw our sweat-tingled bodies into the cold rushing waters, we are battered again by the fucking weight of jewish history - and now we start to suspect it is a substitute for something - an assuaging of a longing that is actually here in the incontrovertible hot tumbler of the present... an insufferable displacement of our own selves in the somnambulist ticking noon of this twenty-first century of dusty eternity where we *know* that history is nothing but a gaggle of putrid nows that pose as yesterdays, that legends are nothing but roiling thoughts inside our own blood-heads... This little spring in the hills where the clear water gushes exactly as it did for thousands and thousands of years, is a mercy because it has no history at all. Here is pure communion of water and rock, and it needs no goddam explanation. Water has no history. Yet all of 'history' is a search for water! - longing for comfort, longing for security; and not yesterday, but today, here, now. There's no explanation needed because there is no explanation. So let's have the courage to care for nothing that's past, let's have courage to exit the gaped theatre of legend and myth, have the guts to walk in blind wonder in a white desert and know that the sky above us has never moved, has never lost itself... because it is nothing and nowhere, is the utter breathing peace of itself, needs no stories and has no stories, collects no relics, shovels and sifts no detritus for tourist-ants who beetle from place to hallowed place looking for their ancestors, who never *were* ancestors because they were still *breathing*, in and out, and certainly hadn't had any pesky descendants yet! Why are we such scammers for an endless narrative? Because we live in a

desert? And now, ta-daaa! Masada. A true fortress to the ego. The rabbi's weighty-portentous automatic pronouncements are jangling on my nerves. Since all events surely exist in order to further the cause of the Jewish people, there could be no contradiction that in 66 CE a group of Jewish rebels, the *Sicarii*, having fled Jerusalem, overcame the Roman garrison of Masada with the aid of a ruse and occupied that flat mountaintop (see photo). According to the first-century Jewish Roman historian Josephus, the Sicarii were an extremist Jewish splinter group antagonistic to a larger grouping of Jews known as Zealots who carried the real burden of the rebellion against the Romans - and that the Sicarii raided nearby Jewish villages including Ein Gedi where they massacred 700 women and children... Erk. Anyway, in 73 CE, the Romans sent the X Legion plus Jewish prisoners of war totalling 15,000 to crush all Jewish resistance. When troops entered the fortress they discovered that its 960 inhabitants had set all buildings but the food stores ablaze then committed mass suicide or killed each other. Josephus wrote of stirring speeches in which the Sicarii leader convinced his fellows to kill themselves. Only two women and five children, a dog, two guinea pigs and an earwig (Jewish) were found alive. And it is for the reason that they were underdogs that they are celebrated as heroes to this day, and not for any innate righteousness on their part... The Polish philosopher Kolakowski in his *Law of the Infinite Cornucopia* asserts that for any given doctrine one wants to believe, there is never any shortage of arguments by which one can support it. Hence the creation of (jewish) myths. Still, though human fallibility implies that we ought to treat claims to infallibility with scepticism, pursuit of the higher (such as truth and goodness) is ennobling. And that is why I'll always have a soft spot for our demanding Jewish friends. My talkative rabbi at the end of the day is not a fool. He knows how hard present life is. He can't keep his t-shirt from turning to a sweat-sodden rag or his beard to a nest of dust, not even before lunchtime, as he staggers under the weight of his own wishing, his own race's wishing. But these hot-blown dead hills and white sandplains have an austere magic of their own that capture and enrapture the ants that walk them, who fill the heartless spaces with their love, their own dreaming, their own precious life and remembrance. In this desert human beings have no reason to be. They must find one.

And thereby let me entertain with a parable on wishful thinking...

'By the shores of the Galilee your writer was weary, and sought an inn wherein he might sup and lay down his drooping head. And lo, there appeared a place that claimed to be an inn since there was a great neon light upon its roof. Upon inspection this traveller found the inn not yet actually built, but no matter, since for any man lacking in worldly goods there shall always be welcoming souls ready to relieve him of his last shekel. Sayeth the proprietor of the inn: What is lost to you or me? Your shekels will buy tiles for my roof, while you for your part may partake of holy sleep. Or not! No sooner had our traveller lain himself down in a room of bare white walls - than lo, from the ceiling a film of white dust like the very dust of angels cascaded down upon the bedclothes and into his mouth

and nose and lungs. And if a man, traveller from afar and unused to the ways of this land is sensitive to the difference between air and dust, he may find this unsettling. And so he asked the proprietor in the very midst of night (the proprietor never sleeps) if he might have another room that celebrateth not the dust of these Galilean hills. And lo, the inn-keeper hath no room in his quarter-built inn, since travellers from far are lodged in every nook and cranny, but he knoweth a place down a road... although there may in truth be no fit bedding there and would the traveller kindly assent to taking his mattress, presumably on his head, and follow the humble fellow far away to a place he cannot see, at a time after midnight yet decidedly before dawn, but which he is assured is clean and quiet even if partly open to the heavens, which surely cannot be a vexation since the balmy sky of the Holy Land shall protect all its children, ancient and modern, living or dead? And so it was done. And lo, the healing power of sleep that consumeth the traveller for but an hour or two is deftly shattered by the cry of an animal within his head, and clamouring zestfully against the peace of the dawn (which is still deep night to any sane person) he learns it to be a great fat red rooster, which in its turn awakeneth other hens and birds in a great unstoppable cackle of animalistic celebration. And the traveller, though bewildered and with racing heart, begins to harken to the cosmic jest, remarking to himself at the wry customs of the denizens of this land of Israel. And through what he discovers to be chicken wire, he understands he is lodged in a humble menagerie. And he laughs in his heart, he being but a mild and simple wanderer. Did he take then his weary mattress on his head and return upon that chalk road to the new-ruined inn? Yea, he did, and a little ruefully. But seated by and by in dun-yellow light of sunrise on the half-bricked rooftop where friendly fronds of jagged rusting steel thrust into the sky, he beholds his innkeeper ascending the dusty concrete stair. And the unshaven black-eyed fellow accosts him with a scowling grunt such as only the children of Zion claim as fit greeting. Still, he is offered a drink, and as he sits amid the jerry-built ruins and gazeth at the Galilean sun shuffling wearily upward over a hazy sea, he knows in his heart there are none to be admonished, for we are all G-d's children in this Holy Land of Israel, where life is automatically a celebration of G-d's good news. So relax oh traveller and drink in the pioneering spirit, the spirit of aiding - by any and all means - thy brother the inn-keeper in his quest to build and to profit from G-d's own country.'

In the white city of Jerusalem, I walked abroad one Sabbath day in one of its quieter suburbs. Soon it began to rain, at which I took my umbrella and opened it. Suddenly from the other side of the street a voice cried: *put down that umbrella!* A black-robed young man with curly sideburns under a black-wide hat stepped across, and with a certain mild annoyance reserved for the slow-witted informed me that raising an umbrella on the Sabbath constituted *work* and was not permitted. Reflecting on this, and despite the twin facts that this was a public street and the personal fiefdom of no man, and that the effort the fellow was putting into dressing me down undoubtedly constituted 'work', I took inspiration from seeing that I'd foolishly deprived the blessed rains of the holy land from soaking me through with the spirit of discipline and self-denial. It is probable that the Sabbath was invented by wise men

to curb the Jews' enthusiasm for working all hours that G-d sends, all for their own betterment. In other words it is an anti-materialist gesture within a deeply materialist spirit. But how long must we whip ourselves with such counter-intuitive 'discipline' before we learn to simply relax? In the northern village of Safed, home to the Kabbalists, I visited a hillside covered in blue graves, attended continually by young men in dark robes, again with wide hats and curls at the sides of their faces, who nodded and bowed at the painted tombs as if their lives depended on it. Next I met a guide who showed me the intricacies of his synagogue, proudly reminding me of the fact that in all the subtly complex lines and traceries and symbols and carvings of the building there was not a single crossing line. There were no *crosses*. The Jews resisted the advent of Christianity as if their lives depended on it. I remarked to him that to await the coming of the real Messiah seemed to me the biggest case of *coitus interruptus* in the history of man. He had the grace to laugh. Though perhaps at that point it was me who needed some female loving. This is an intellectual religion, although the Kabbalists who thrived in Safed in the sixteenth century were not only exemplars of intellectual clarity but startling mysticism as well. Safed today is about fundamentalism, about orthodoxy, tradition and ritual self-denial. The search for truth so easily gets absolutist and reductionist in that all things get subsumed to the practitioner's one-pointed need. A thing I well know. And all those *isms* of the world tend to murder a little counter-thought known as compassion - which is love for the minutiae of the world, love for every grain of sand and dust, for every struggling heart, for every child in need, for the whole and entire history of creation. But fundamentalism... this is the story of *denial* and *erasure*. It certainly flourishes in desert lands.

Yet in ancient Judaea, in caves dug into the chalk-white hills there lived a wise and gentle sect known as the Essenes. Knowing destruction to be near, they deposited their collected wisdom inside jars and hid them in caves, sealed against the ages. These Dead Sea Scrolls have done more to mythologise this country's weighted past than any one thing. But since wisdom is not subject to words or utterances but instead must be re-learned by each soul who fretfully dogs the earth in search of its waters, sealed as it were in a silent eternal covenant - these Scrolls, like the *Torah* or any sacred text, are mainly historic curiosities that serve to remind us of the notion of winning over adversity in a single time and place... for the true role of any holy book is to *release* me and you to stage our own impassioned inquiry into the nature of being. For myself, I will not follow the literal injunctions of any text. I may return to it for help, but one day I will bury it in sand and walk on alone. The real journey is in the endlessly malleable mind, source of all creation - and outer symbols will be put away and outer worlds become grist to the inner mill-wheel. The seeker's journey is in inner universes, and his footprints barely mark any ground. And if the ground be desert, then sand-winds of ineluctible change will erase them instantaneously and forever even as he walks. In the winds and sands of time, there is no history, no history at all. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose*. There is only This. And This, *this action* - is but the amoral unmoral truth. This is the real story of the Holy Land.'

### **A Magnet for the Lonely**

Marsha and Matty, though my moon is in the sign of Leo wherein I endlessly crave attention, and despite it being a private affair... I must relate a *spiritual thing* to you. And it is this: once in a summer in Greece, I had a vision of the *fibres of the sea*. In the full blaze of sun, the moon's deep work was deftly done. I had left my home, my family and my theatre on a one-way journey (not for the first time, since my family moved countries when I was a child) - but this time it was to another kind of country: one of growing up, of leaving the past. This country, 'where hills rise in front of you and the road falls away behind, a country where the carpet of flowers of your personal life is conjured as you walk and as in a dream disappears the moment your attention turns from it.' This country is a road in twilight, a green hill in distance, reverent bower of poplars, row of pots on a wall, blush of bougainvillea in the clasp of soft wind and sun, telephone wires that keep you company as you dip-surge along the road in your car. And you are the actor, the tourist who knows how borders fall away because you moved on and left them, how they had no option but to die at your neglect. This your country is no country at all, since borders are mere lines of the mind and passports are silly books with photos in them, and ethnic divisions are turgid chapters in some book called me and mine and you and yours. And now I see why a nomad is the bastard child of civilisation; the gypsy, the tuareg, the jew - a border-eating threat to fenced farms and streets and clans. But if you don't mind being a moneyed tourist, happy to gawk at fenced-in places that others covet as home, then you might fool yourself you are happy. Be happy then. The sun is shining and you are in Greece! But such a timeless land of antiquity is a dream-escape, and this sundrenched land is a magnet for the lonely... On the late afternoon beach at Nauplion, with ruined castle behind and Joni Mitchell's *The moon's a harsh mistress* on my personal stereo, I had a vision of the underbelly of the sea. It was as if the waters coalesced in fibres like hair, and all the fibres were one fibre, inextricably full and muscular and undulating like a sea-woman's thick hair. And the glitter on the sea danced in unison like fresh juice of light-delight. I pinched and slapped myself, alone on that pebble-beach, and still the numinous vision would not fade. It was the fibres, those indestructible fibres that lingered, that everlasting underbelly. It was unforgettable. We are the soul of interconnectedness, they said. *There is nowhere that is not the sea*, they said.

That travel is fleeting is clearly why people celebrate it. But the fleeting seeks permanence, so we know it as a lonely occupation. That summer I came across a middle-aged teacher fellow (let's call him Gary) who travelled to Greece each and every year (he said) to escape his fogged-up technical institute in northern England, where I gleaned that every day the lord tested his ability to keep his hands off his innocent boy students. He would come to Greece in the summer to get drunk and dream on romance in all the familiar places he'd ever been. The thing about homos (not gays) is that they're the same at seventy as at seventeen. Gary was always wanting to be breathlessly drunk in love in bars

and ruins with some novel someone. On the Acropolis between the stones in the heat we got to talking about the ends of life and he pronounced me a most remarkable young man, as a homo teacher can who knows how to flatter the young in the semi-detached English way, as if Greece brought out a quiet glory in all of us, though not to be sentimental of course. But when pissed he was a sorrowful sight, and I think at forty-six he just wanted affection, not really sex.

In my hostel I met a precocious Indian boy of middle class who was on his way to study at MIT in America. He seemed to take a shine to me since he began to talk at me, and soon hinted that it would be a jolly good idea indeed that he and I should share a room. Already he seemed to know all there was to be known about everything (in the circularity of a cosseted life) since he'd no doubt been pummelled and flattered by turns all of his young years by his middle-class Indian parents (I can just picture them, all serious and furrow-browed) and the plush boy had come like ripened fruit to believe in the perfection of all his doings. All used to polished floors and professional instructions, he had not even begun to grow up. Yet when he saw my little pup tent, in our shared bunk room at the hostel, he set his round brown eyes and his adolescent heart on going *camping*. In the bush amid the stones and dessicated trees of Greece, he wanted to go camping, yes yes. As if a tent were a wondrous thing dropped from Mars and which he might never see again. To pitch and lie in it, and wake up in it and sit by it and make a fire and eat his breakfast and swim in the stream by it! I'd regretted carrying that bulky tent, but now I was embarrassed. Even worryingly touched. Yet the thought came that I couldn't stand his chatter any more, all that eyelash-fluttering cleverity he'd polished in his familial days. I had to let him think he could come camping with me... before he went off on his treadmill journey and got his PHD and made his monee and his familee set up his little future wife and they started their own familee and became fully emptily sophisticated and all of it. And here in Greece he seemed to dimly face a new and unsettling neediness. Despite this little cloud though, the boy-pundit would still cap off your sentences with his finger-tip knowledge and his impregnable ideas of the future oh yes, since he was a walking talking pee aitch dee candy-date. Nowhere to put your mind, except to hint that he shut the fuck up? But one never did since he was a lad and he so so wanted to go camping, and this little Greek sojourn was his reward for twenty years of obeying the pristine path his parents had set him, his little off-the-beaten-track taste of a thing called wildness! When I finally left him at Delphi and boarded my bus, he waved in the sort of distracted dismissive way that said, *here I go now, back to my loneliness*. And he'd say that I was another disappointing person who would not let him be the enthusiastic nice chatter-boy he was. Oh these europeans are so surly and unforthcoming. But me, some party-actor who fulfils his kiddy dream? I am cancelled by such personalities, I turn passive, blank. Besides, my own moody odyssey to somewhere-nowhere (I hate travelling) would not be diverted by fake intimacy of any kind. Yet guilt wagged its finger all the same... One day in the flung future he'll chatter to his pretty Indi wife about 'the days in Greece when we went camping' and she, semi-dutiful will say oh yes yes darling, and distracted by which jewel to

choose for the party at the jockey club tonight where Mala and Amma and her other semi-friends will be wearing their best nuggets, darkly she'll allow herself to think: who would even *want* to know what camping is? Oh, my nice husband is an idiot sometimes.

Meanwhile my middle-aged Englishman pursued camp of a different sort. In Nauplion we got blind drunk on Ouzo or whatever Greek slime it was, in some nameless bar where he'd had such great times in the past which he now repeated to boast of to other strangers in his edifying future. And our Indian boy even has a glass or two and even feels a little tipsy, oh yes no, but no matter, what is tipsy when oh my god you can talk even faster and your bubble mind works even *better*, especially when these people don't know you, and silly talk is best when people don't know you since there is not a thing they realise you don't know about. Isn't it? Gary, our balding wispy-haired sentimental ho, didn't register pathos outside his own, and was happy instead to have two unlikely companions pay attention to him in the greasy baked way that drinkers on holiday do, as if this faux intimacy were the naturallest thing in God's earth, here in our stranger-heaven holiday of grecian solitude. So we wound our way between lit-up drink islands through the dark town of dusty streets in the night-heat summer, as if life were all spontaneous and new in a place that is deliberately nowhere, and we could resolutely ignore the drench-sad curtaining of our lives, sputtering onward into dribble futures.

Earlier in Athens I'd met a bearded and large-headed professor at a café, who sat me down and deftly grilled me on the content of my Freudian Unconscious (there is no other kind), and I had no idea it was all prelude to getting into my trousers, since I'd no hint he was even a homo. He was instead a master at subtlety. Perhaps I should call this one darkly broodingly gay. I believe he was there studying ruins. Seemed to know too about the best culinary dens of the city, and one evening he took me to an alarmingly clandestine place down a pin-narrow alley, where in the dim light several open-air tables nestled under a huge black-and-green mossed wall that seemed to tower up to the sky, and under which invited guests whispered, their faces in candle shadow. The menu did not exist on paper, instead an ancient grizzled gnome (the proprietor, I was smilingly assured) brought a tray of plastic models: *moussaka souvlaki yes yes*, foisting them under our noses in coy light and jabbering out their virtues. So life-like were they I could not help remarking to my archeologic companion that these might be fossilised or Tussaudian remains of dinners past, and it did cross one's mind the menu may not have altered in that genteel cloaca of Athens for several centuries, decades at least. No matter. My professor assured me tradition was the point, and all would be well. I'd begun to see that his need to impress could not possibly involve unpredictable food experiences. Or perhaps he was testing my capacity for irony in this city of fickle summer romance. It was his table talk now to expound the symbolism of Forest as Unconscious, not that I chose to guess it before he'd smoothly gleaned my deepest (sexual) secrets. He was obviously practised in this tedious slow nocturnal prelude to furtive fucking. I am rather good at appearing naïve, but suddenly realised my thespian-antipodean air had

given him the idea I was gay and that this was the perfect place to admit it, and to him. Romance! Specialness to cloak the staleness of oft-sung hopes. All so self-referential and smug-sad, though his eau de cologne was classy enough. And next day at the street café, when I coolly announced my plan to travel to a destination far away, how cool and nonchalant was his wishing of the best, as if he were far too clever to be tricked by the forest of his own unconscious, which actually pummelled and stabbed at him in his bearded loftiness, in his deft intellect, in his hypocritical loneliness. His honourable brow told that with his little problem of ‘gayness and respectability inhabiting the same lumpy bed’, it had over the years ‘become of deeper interest’, and he had had to eruditely dabble, with ooh-I-dare-you toe dipping in cauldrons of the dark in order to satisfy himself that he was not merely a gawp-shivering arse bandit but a craggy Hemingwayesque masterly professor, ironic seducer of equally ironic partners in the urbane spaces of a foreign city far from home. And therein was the casual tragedy, the dusty nothingness of a stranger-encounter that failed to gloss the veneer of yet another dry academic business trip. On reflection you see, he’d decided always to keep his detached respectability, never to reveal himself in breathy soft longing. A wise decision.

On another weekend, me and my needy English homo and my thick-spectacled Indian boy took a trip out of Athens to Epidaurus in the countryside. In the bay-like amphitheatre under a star-balmy night we witnessed masked ant-actors calling and gesticulating in Greek the comic verses of Menander. Afterward, we wandered lazily away with the crowds through the ancient lanes, not really caring for direction or time. Knowing we couldn’t get back to Athens we casually entered a field nearby, strewn with thorn bushes and stones. Ironically we had no tent, and we turned into three tired bodies on the ground, dispersed like ancient leaves, without food or water, ready to dissolve in antique dreams. The boy was embarrassed but his wide chocolate eyes seemed to trust in us all the same, as if by some hope here was something vivid-wild, unplanned, even dissolute. My homo spoke paternally to him, well used to acting the dissolute. And perhaps if we’d slept on there, two thousand years on, someone would have dug up our fossilised forms from under drifts of sand and dust, and might have wondered at how we came to be lying about in that field, or even been moved to theorise about us. We might have been judged to be three assorted sad knockabouts, in wandering exile from our straight paths, cavorting in the wastes of hot Greece, sometime and no-time in the everness of imagined history.

### **Once There Was a Person**

Once the traveller Blank fled to the isle of Malta, seeking refuge by its bright summer sea. Arriving one clear still afternoon at a rocky bay he hired a snorkel at a beach kiosk, walked away from the crowds and dived into deep water under cliffs. The sun-orb’s yellow beams filtered like watery dust into bubbled depths, and he watched the tiny fish hugging reefs, adjusting and riding and balancing minutely in invisible currents. No rest for these fish! They seemed to make a kind of stability out of infirmity, riding their water winds, somehow seeming to achieve *themselves* for an instant... before the



instant dissolved them, the heaving current dissolved them. Yet if you blinked, there they were again, then gone, and then again, riding. And so on forever, all their watery lives. Is it just a fish that we think of, or do we think of the sea? Are we not always wiped away? So also a man, with his undersea currents of the heart: his protection-need, his mind, karma, history, soul destiny... all his social-familial webs, his political cities and internets and markets and Wall Streets... All things that form the fractal fibres of his blood, the currents and winds of his life. Blank opens and closes his eyes. What is a man if he lives and dies? He is nothing but the flow, though he is somehow himself. A kind of rigid flow, that always makes him believe he is a man. The man known as Blank swims on. With the sun on his back he drifts in rhythm with the finned ones below him. In his chest and heart he feels the forces and waves. He is moving and vibrating in the undersea. Like a fish, he never rests, yet rests.

...I believe there was once a person who lived and passed away, of whom nothing was ever written, no photograph was taken, who did not a thing noteworthy or remarkable, who lived in a place all forgotten in a land ruled by no remembered king, who tasted nothing but humble baked bread of a wheatfield, and who felt all seconds and minutes and days of his life sufficient unto himself in unutterably quiet harmony with his breath, who felt the wind and sun, and the night and the stars on his skin in the darkness, who had never the mind to wonder at the wonder of being or birth, who passed away in the quiet tides of the unknown, his head on no soft pillow known to another (except perhaps a casual wife he never married but who shared his days and doings then herself passed on), a person who is not even a dream in the mind of another, or a memory or cause or consequence, who is clean beyond the intrusions of myth and make-believe, and who lies still, without future or past in quiet earth turned by the casual plough of some other soul unknown, in some other story in some other dimension... I believe there once was such a person.

### **Surface Paradise**

Visible for unbroken miles on a great arc of coast stretching north and south, the clustering skyscrapers of Queensland's Gold Coast thrust upward in audacious hope. Their sandy roots grasp at the cusp of land and sea and sky, and crinkling strangely in their walls of mirror glass are yellow-blue bands of strand and sea. Their climax of hope comes all at once, and behind is an unclimax of water-suburbs, nestling flatly amid canals and inlets, replete with subtropic palms of lucent green that flutter in ample Queensland sun - each with a little village of smooth pink roads and calming humps, cake-and-coffee shop, plump office of real estate. Deep sleep suburbs and no city in sight, a great body without a head. Here the folks come to live their long late afternoon, to hunker down to life beyond the old struggle pits of sweat and need and false hope - those things that happened before we made it, before we entered lucky-country heaven while still on earth. At the boat harbour, tethered white hulls sleekly tilt and drift on imperceptible tides. They never leave shore. Golf links greenly breathe in yellow private sun. Avenues of Hollywood palms, their serrated pineapple trunks curling upward in

California movie dreams, bring the nostalgia of maritime and sunlit places, the feeling that there never was a place or time not like this, where we retreat into child days of sand and loafers, leathery tans and carefree tennis, salad and terrace drinks. And at day's end we gaze out at white birds wheeling and diving for fish under a dream-orange purple sunset on a darkening glitter sea. This, in our last few clustered years, is the timeless heaven of reward.

On the beachfront at midday I watch the faces of Indian or Muslim tourists hovering over the strand, sporting their unbeachy bling and their button-eyed kids, and I see in their eyes a familiar gleam: the legendary golden strand at Surfers' Paradise! Their expressions signal a kind of arrival; the brochures didn't lie! They drink the blue with their eyes, gaze left and right down the duned arc of coast before turning to goggle at blue towers that dream glassily over the mirror ocean. At last, the arrivistes whisper, the gate to a dream we always lived in the wanting of it. There is nowhere else to ever go, all other places are erased, for this is paradise... a promise that things might always be this, in perpetual sun under perpetual sky, the green gleaming breakers surging and curling on the yellow strand at our feet, a sketch of eternity by the shores of a great sea, our little chance to believe we're a thing that matters, creatures at peace, that our short days in the sun are really eternal days and fruitful-filled. Heaven is really a place, a place where nothing need happen ever again. We render quiet applause to those who made it. No cause for envy, we all can make it! The great sentinel towers call to us, we denizens who gather behind in lower green heavens, invest our careful moneyed life, pass on, unperceptible and undisturbed.

Marsha, do you remember how we dreamed of a holiday here, and when we came on that windy rough day, the three of us sat on the long beach watching the board riders slithering and hunkering on skins of tubular waves that roiled at us out of the sea... And how we suffered a kind of instantaneous boredom, as if those waves never would arrive at our feet, how we were all restless, and nothing seemed to fit. And then how something violent happened between you and Matty when she told you she didn't want ice cream because she wasn't a child anymore, which little act put us at odds for days. I think it's good we suffered here though, because we saw that the special stage set in which that bit of badness took place was nothing but an irony... any place where struggle and pain is absolved away as if an embarrassment or silliness, is *unreal*. And paradise is a ridiculous myth, while the Internal Event is all... And the only other thing I recall is that you told me how on the last morning you dove alone into quiet green-clear water and pissed in it, and it was a sweet relief, since you felt entirely free to piss in (and all over) paradise! A heartwarming story.

We who are numbed and gulled and mugged by smug abundance: we dance the thick blind dance, we creatures of the sensory world, we surfers on the waves of things. That which is subtle is denied us, is made invisible while we cling to bodies of flesh. For the subtle, *the currency of all currencies*, is never precious! Being unscarce it is lost in plain sight, is left to flies in the marketplace, is bartered

and sold for a song; being all-abundant it nullifies demand and supply. Diamonds and gold are deemed far more precious than it, yet it is the gem of gems. So absurdly vague is it, why talk about it - just as we human beings who are so absurdly kingly, why even stoop to praise ourselves? *The currency of all currencies* is so much our own... that we never ever want it.



### **The Ever-Returning**

The traveller Blank records. 'Conscience is always nagging, saying, can I take another human being along a road with me? Should I bother trying to be part of 'someone else'? For the sake of help and care and respect I will. This tract on wandering, this dance with the *anima*, is my effort to get the Unavoidable Woman to take me seriously, or else my attempt to take *her* seriously. But again, why bother? Because if not her, then someone else, somewhere else, sometime else. Not to mention I feel sorry for her, and would like to help her lift herself. So, Marsha! I perennially talk to you, and so talk to myself. And nagging at me is the fear of not being around any more, of dribbling on into what to the physical sense is oblivion. Yet I don't seek out physical attachments, but a different commitment, maybe to the idea that *all the possible worlds are myself*. It seems not an accident that your correspondent is staring at a funereal drama on a television today...

The church bells tolls, and the protagonist, standing amid a cluster of souls gathered about a departing body, succumbs to the unnerving truth that time has run out for him... The robust and youthful bow in grudging solemnity, but the aged bystanders nurture their own emotional departures, inwardly rework the value of a life. Whether or not they believed it when the sages said... 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... they sense that a stringent mathematic is coming, a cool judgement whereby the soul, parked on its conveyor, readied for departure to a great clearing house out of sight, released from its packaging in a whimpering 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. Yes, a breath departs, returns, immerses, emerges. What frame of mind then, to suit 'departure'? Herein is our riddle of ignorance, for we re-imitate what we think we know, seek an ideal version of what we failed to be: a better lover, better parent, juster man or woman, sweeter, seriouser, sinless. Ours were lives lived behind ego-fences in private gardens, where the little things we did in fiddled isolation seemed to us momentous, poignant, apt. We were ever islands in our self-concern, our ignorance. But in the flood of our leaving there is panic - and when ideals mingle with sickness, arrangements with pain like blood with gravy, when strangers and priests must signpost our exit - so this day we have a play, at this moss-walled quiet place under the arms of great trees... where the long cars parade in slow motion, 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 mourners 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 subsoil, 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 of whom will weep), the ghosts of the future. Today I am one of them... and I wonder, who should weep for me? It must be no-one, least of all myself.

### **The Mirror**

I am adrift this time in Wyoming, hunkered in some far-flung incarnation of Bates Motel. Pessimism is back, in alcoholic form this time. Marsha, you'll remember my habit of looking at mirrors, lingering incoherently, especially before bed. You never liked it. But then you never invited me to bed.

I still want to convince myself life is a *tangible thing*... that we can count on continual supplies of loo paper... that the toothbrush never changed since we were kids... that pleasure is watching TV wars and seeing them cutely resolve according to American viewpoint... that despite my protruding midriff butter is no killer... that my hair's still here though it seems to run like salivating dogs to leaner pastures. Search for meaning I blame for that! I see a lot of people have dropped off the perch in these years. On the plus side, not a bunch of them are known to me. Sobering idea: entire population of world will be gone in a hundred winters. Who'll run the bus system? How'll a body walk with no head? Unutterable minions of thoughts are erased. Who can bear to bear witness? Sensation still keeps me from utter boredom, momentarily blurs the skein of memory. I cling to certainty that I don't snore: an advantage of sleep, sleep of not knowing, journeying instead. I recollect a face in a mirror. Four fillings in a jaw, four beasts of the apocalypse. Somewhere a dentist must be happy. Outside on the street drunks cry with enthusiasm. I should read the *Huffington Post*, try to give a shit. Governments apparently still do things. One rarely smiles. Stomach is queasy. Somehow I came through mother's birth canal. Thank God for nurses back then. How did schoolmate Jay belch the opening of Beethoven's Fifth? Poison spiders inhabit other lands. Choose travels carefully. There's no centre. My name is Blank. All will be gone.

I bear witness without identity. Stand at a toilet, piss liquid. Sewerpipe in the bladder of a city. What goes on in there? Biologic logic accumulates, drip drip discharge urged by muscles and nerves, electrically glistening. No end to nature's ingenious functionings. I'm lulled tonight, though the world is full of killing. Riots in the streets, but they don't bang on my door. Don't owe anyone anything. Or do I? Thank you for mirrors. Let us flirt with some version of truth. You see how my problem is *involvement*. I shun accustomed worlds that people invest in, behaviour reduced to paper gestures, feelings to calcified soap opera, love to sentiment, deep phobias to poking sticks at painted devils. A drifter's idea of 'location': that wherever I find myself claims to be real, that any nook of the world seems to be itself. This is my problem in the light of emptiness. Because I'm haunted by the bother - of filling the emptiness.

Whitman said: *There are multitudes within us*. It is a bare and obvious truth that so-called atoms, quantum building-blocks of matter and worlds, consist of fucking nothing but empty space. *Who* looks in this sodding mirror? If I see a thing it's because I'm unmaterial. Perception can't happen unless light reflects a thing in the seer's eye. 'Material world' is awareness by any measure. No space unless we invent a border, no time unless we dream a pinprick. Birth of form from emptiness: where is the border? *Who* focuses on the accustomed world, believes in it? *Who* feels the drama, need, fear, physicality? We just got the dope on relativity! Einstein ducked the facts of his own theory, Niels Bohr got it. If you're not shocked to your tits by quantum physics you've not grocked it at all. I'd add: we have to stay ignorant to live in this world. No man can see the face of god and live. Time is

crushed in my petty gesture, time is wiped out with newness. All worlds are playthings of the seer. Real science is to grock how awareness makes worlds. All our acts are self-referring, virtual, enclosed, solipsistic, contingent, foolish. Awareness is the mirror of them all. Awareness is all there can ever be. Marsha, thanks for tuning in to my wet solipsistic narcissistic rave. Or not. Would you ever join me in toasting our closet immortality? Or at least talk to me... then I might begin my own slow return back to you. That is, if you want it. Otherwise, *sayonara.*'

### **Marsha Writes!**

...Immediately in Marsha's LETTER I pick up a creeping sense that she might have worked some stuff out... that she might not need to need anyone, anymore... that she needs to be solo more than she needs to punish. After umpteen births in cosmic time! And though birth is always a forgetting, I think she has at last remembered. What she *is*, and needs to *do*, that is. She never said a word about it, but such is our complicated bond, I feel it all from a distance. Which is really no distance at all. So. So. That is why, of the few-and-far-between times Marsha has written to me, this last one deserves a regurge.

Hi (BLANK), Yeah, cheers for your bunch of stories or lessons or whatever you think to call them. You know me, I'm not one to respond at length, except to say I read them, most of them anyway... Here's some news. Matty had her seventeenth this week, and I guess that makes her eligible to fuck off away from me and play mature adult etcetera. Nope, I joke. She had the hip and cool in-crowd at our place, and I inflicted Lou Reed on them as punishment for their wanky little hip toons. I even shook my hot arse to their music. Suck on it kids. Following that they stared at zombie movies till dawn. Don't they have identity problems! Her father gave her money (too much) and she now intends to travel to far-flung places. Won't say where. I assume she got some kind of bug from you. Now, I shouldn't tell you I got another boyfriend (his name is Boris, believe it if you want) 'cause that would possibly offend you - but if I *did* offend, would you really have a right to care? It seems I am a serial man eater anyway. No, too simplistic. I do learn this and that as time goes by, and I don't mind telling you some of your mudslinging in my direction might even have stuck. So give yourself a tick, baby. Did you get that my form of respect to you is not to take your feelings too seriously? Or that I did you the honour of taking you seriously by dumping all my shit on you? (Pause) Wassamatter, don't like it? Come on now, *doctor*. Anyway, I can't say I think your endless introspection is going to help the fact that we're all basically egotists who want what we want and who all live and then die off and maybe we live over again, I don't know, but anyway it all goes on into fucking eternity for ever and ever amen so why worry??? There ya go, philosophy! Did I get the gist, professor? Anyway, drop in when you're here next. I'll cook you your favourites. Besides, Boris is getting to be a bit of a fucking bore, even if he is a semi-great lay. And Matty says Hi (you should be honoured). Ciao, MARSHA.

### All In the Same Boat

The traveller Blank lets himself imagine he has lately found (the fool's inertia of) peace: this time in a little boathouse couched in bushy slopes by waters of a splendid city. His settled neighbours perform their house and garden regularities and he is glad: they make him feel cosily unspecial, a humble actor in the human game of self-consuming. In this eternal empty life what shall we be? Not a jot of it is personal, yet we chew our cud of want, chart our snail trails, make our beds and lie in them, imperceptibly morph to the next hue or nuance of trivial destiny in the flow of time's waters, we lotus gods in our deep slow morphology of non-evolving. When we're older we 'witness vapours in familiar mental skies', but when tyrannically young we fake up mental squalls, and clamour and revel in them and demand results. Yet we are always here, always *this*, and always gone.

Blank records. 'Matty the teen rival to my daunting and majestic Marsha, materialises out of the blue of a midsummer's morning at my backwater stilt-house in the emerald city of Sydney. I step in from the jetty and there she is, plonked on my sunbed by the window, coveting my cove.

- Giddy cobber! World traveller washes up on yer doorstep ta daa!

I mouth hello, startled again at the old insouciance. Hints on the Marsha grapevine said little Matt might turn up.

- Is your mother with you?

- No way. (Kooky twinkle in her eye) Me just got in from Vietnam. (No doubt she hit town a while back) Been there? Too steamy eh. Think I got a *disease*. Down in Oz to convalesce. Cute little stilt house! Put me up? Need some swims.

I point delicately to the issue of space, and that the owner only said I could stay if I painted it.

- No worries Blank, just paint round my sexy bod as I lounge about sucking up your harbour views. Cool!

I feed her breakfast and she munches heartily (for a sick waif), meanwhile tossing her facts like turds among the teacups.

- Mummy's jealous of my hilarious freedom *and* my travel budget courtesy of Boris (not from dad like she was told). Boris is a money tree! Now I'm gunna hook up with the daughter of a business mate of his so he can wheedle more contracts from said mate. We're all mates!

(Oh crikey) - What's the guy's name, or hers?

- He, Plotski, she, Marina Plotskaya. Plot thickens eh!

- And Boris is the guy who's great in bed?

- Mum told you that? Tryhard

- Uh-huh

- Not *you*, wimp of the wacky letters who shot through just to get her attention

- No comment. He wants to marry her?

- No comment. But *Marina*... problem *there* is: she's butch, gay, not pretty. My anti-glamour campaign!
- Against mum
- Nah! Stand up for the needy of the world
- Russians are needy?
- Yep, dramatic tortured pessimists. Need to lighten 'em all up in sunny Seedney!

One is initiated thus into Matty's faked-up mission. My mobile, scarce used these days, is grabbed by she as it dings a message. The waif adopts a stentorian tone. *'Hey Blank! Boris and me are coming to Sydney. Never had a family trip here. Matty's maybe with you? Keep it quiet! Didn't consult her on our plan. She might bolt. Cheers, M.'*

- Family trip? Jesus, like we need one in every country on the planet. Listen Blank, I'm meeting my Marina at a book café in Bondi called *Gertrude and Alice*. Know it? (I do) No doubt mum and her russki fuck, sorry, dear future dad, will wanna muscle in. That is, if *you* tell 'em. What's that *smell*?

- Bushfires

- Yuck. Not here tho?

- Fifty miles west. They're gunna die out there, along with the koalas

- No wuckers. So, *Gertrude and Alice*. Get the allusion?[\*] [\* Apparently Matty is the legendary alien Gertrude Stein, who'll dazzle her ugly hapless lover Alice B. Toklas]

Matty is distracted though, and her brow knits up. Tough, being young and molto ambitious. She hangs in the afternoon, dangles toes over the jetty. The smoke is getting thick. In the evening she dives into the bay. Her little head bobs in darkling waters. Late in the night she prattles. - Your story about that terrorist girl in the desert got me going. Need to wander in random places, do random hook-ups (no matter what sex). Resist parent control. *To be where we are, as we are*. What happens happens. Nothing moral. Be Here Now. *Suicide is the real solution...*

Her listening post sagely nods his head.

And terrorist Matty's café scene is suitably turgid. She dragged me to it and we sat waiting for 'Marina' to turn up, which Matt claimed she was perpetually about to do. Instead Marsha bores in, in designer-ripped jeans heels glam glasses baseball cap and crocodile bag like a hybrid of New Hippie Trump Redneck and Flash Tottie. We instinctively stand up as if to say *Er, you mean us?* A smooth-looking guy I take to be Boris makes his entry, puts solemn-heavy hands on Matt's shoulders, kisses her head. Then he shakes my mitt. I've heard much of you, he says thickly. Cumbersome Marsha-Matty-Me hugs jostle up the fetid room and its bookies tourists tomes and teacups. We frown and posture significantly around a table till Matty chooses her moment and says: 'Mum, Boris, Blank: I've an announcement! (She's a dab at these as we know) I wanna hold a special ceremony with a super-significant person in my life! Also, her influential dad will be here, an old associate of Boris (smile to Boris). The 'special one' asked that the event be done on a *yacht* on the harbour. Three days from



today. So...’ (weedier smile at Boris). She sits, and her eyes withdraw in her head like a cat’s. There’s a thick pause before Marsha grips her and pulls her out and stands over her on the hot pavement like a gunslinger, and Matty seems to turn thinner in her slip of a summer dress while traffic booms and over their heads a blood-grey high-noon sky hangs. Boris whispers: ‘No-one should worry about zis. I will arrange it all.’ ‘Best of British’, I say to him.

. . . . .

Our Russian seems keen to lecture about Australia and its aliens... ‘Those convicts and their masters who sailed here, shackled in this borderless place, where dusky ancient men watched from the trees’. ...Ships, of stick masts and rags, hulked and nodded in the bays, discharged their disgruntled vermin, bookending the long hypnosis of lower-deck dungeons, flecked horizons, glittering seawinds. Browed cliffs rose up curtain-like at the harbour’s mouth as white birds wheeled and squawked in the sky. Saliva of surf slumped on pancake rocks, smoke rose in twirls from a summer gum forest, and the yellow grin of sleeping coves, crowded in by stick trees with peeled trunks whose wisped white heads lolled in the blue, disconcerted the arrivistes. Then, the threat of inland, of great khaki forests, fires on the interior plain and dark people of sixty thousand years, who’d leave their weak to die if the food gather was threatened - made the white men whisper, and strut, and cower.

These white men and their women over time built hillside terraces and pottery alleys and piggledy fences, that fester today in the grilled sun. Dented steps and pointy black-iron ringed by dusty weeds, and water glimpses and crumble-walls (squeezes of sandstone that fail a little in each sudden rain) buffer chimneyed terrace rows that pitch up into the blue. People sweated here in the purview of rum ships in the slum heat, in pinched colony-loneness amid odours of plague and rot, as their dim interior hardinesses wrestled with the promise of glitter sea. On the islands, prisons squatted. Centuries later, superego mansions and towers elbow each other on these harbour hills, and under, in tamed bays of watery real estate, stick masts jostle and clink as weekend boatie pioneers beaver the bathetic ecstasy of their leisure. Boris’s voice is sardonic: *Is a boat park cuter than a car park?* Sydneysiders hug their Mammon of real estate and their glamoured stage set at the end of a planet - walled and camera-ed, sealing up happiness lest neighbours or neo-convicts or ‘mates’ steal an inch - squeezes ever upward in contusions of columns and patios, pools and porsches on coliseum hillsides. Towers, more proletarian, poke up like lego, each grilled window a squeezed vista of Eden, beyond box balconies where me-me proprietors claim to plant a foot, half in the sky, half on the continent beneath.

In winter the Emerald City is sadder, understated, calm, and waters in lit bays lift and sigh under the hills. Further back on gridded plains is a slung metropolis: bungalows of baked brick walls and red-hat roofs and steel fences - our hot utopia built on sand, massed effort to enshrine and placate the body, or a spirit of pioneer endurance, or the hash of multiculturalism, or the interior illnesses of affluence.

Our shared selfish utopia is unnameably elusive still, though we cherish a lean Aussie spirit: of impersonal personableness, happy-grim neighboury giddays and understated luck, we hard affable competitive nuts.

On the terrace above Paradise Beach, in afternoon blaze under grand spreadeagling figs, a little party clutches bags and bottles, knits a collective brow, longs to fob off these yellow elements. Oil slopped on skins against the air's dessication, they stand mute, statue-like, watching rollers peel in off a blue horizon. At last the girl Matty orders her pilgrims to trudge blaring sands to her spotted picnic spot beside the frilling surf. The grains slither and their shins and thighs ache - these soft whitey fools in single file on Paradise Beach, grit in their ears, wanting the salty undrinkable sea even as its winds blow their heads to nowhere. A red plum sun dangles in lurid sky. At last they stand and blink in the fry and glitter, expose bikinis and budgies and grease their arms, wanting to thrill in rinsing shore winds, lounge with ease on their sandpaper terrace (while dreaming of turf and gardens) or suck on bottles of fizzed hope and whoop at daring boys who dance the surf of the lucky country... and as the sun lowers, to dolt their *she'll be right* rites with neighboury revellers, grinningly or pensively turning a snag in fat-licked little cauldrons from which satisfied grey wisps rise up, even under the whelming bloodsmoke sky of a summer country on fire.

Bushfires in paradise! Prized suburbs blurred to extinction in haze, clinging to a vacant continent, hunkering down against billion-year truths. *We know* we should've studied those Aborigines who naked walked unbound plains and forests, stringy tribes who knew where the water is, where animals roam, where the fire comes from, their sun-painted bodies inseparable from the contours of a harsh arcadia. Today, another hundred dream homes are dangled and cooked and belched under a red cruel front. I, Blank, cocoon myself by the waters of the far east. They save us here.

. . . . .

On Sunday we're aboard the respectably gleaming fifty-foot yacht *Colonial*, in still shoals off Shark Bay. The vessel tilts imperceptibly in waters made lurid by a smoked pomegranate sun. Boris is Captain since he hired her, and her white mast surges over all heads. We are united in longing for a fluttering blue-ocean breeze. A table laden with seafood and iced drinks straddles the rear deck. Bouquets of red-yellow flowers stand sentinel.

Marsha manoeuvres to get me alone. On the foredeck she slips off her party dress; her in-your-face white bikini and libidinous legs dare us men to relieve ourselves of discipline and philosophy. Our Russian glances furtively at the rear. Deep sunglasses wipe her eyes. She announces:  
- Things've moved on since your day, Blank. All that wandering put you on the outer. Me, I don't wanna keep Matty on a leash, just need her to see she shouldn't keep using me as *bogeywoman*

- Still a thing to prove then
- She'll never be as cool and elusive as I
- Which of you's the try-hard?
- Fuck. I've got wisdom, unlike her narcissist generation
- Humility too
- Don't sweat. I have her sussed
- Boris agree?
- Boris needs to buy favours
- Which I never did
- Yeah Blank, in that respect you're broke. (Smile) But yep, I use you as leverage when he gets too on top
- No-one'll ever get on top unless you invite them, Marsha
- Feed the old victim status, you mean
- So you can *murder* the victim. Revenge is the spice of living!
- Got it in one, mister
- Though the matter of Matty is more delicate
- She doesn't have to be a cunt!
- Let her piss on us all from a height. Really, till the day she learns there are trustable people in her own family
- That include you?
- Hoping so. We'll have a laugh
- Me, I'll keep up the bitch
- I like that you're a bitch
- I'm betting Matty joins my club in the end
- Ooh look, dolphins!
- Whatever. By the way, I need you to get in with Boris. Fill him in a bit with your psycho insights
- Wanting allies now?
- No way. I stand alone, mister no-name, as you well know
- Love you too
- What d'you think of my breast implants? Fuckin' hot
- Didn't even notice
- Jesus. Men.

Boris totters down the deck, looms over us.

- I have a text. They arrive soon. This Marina, I cannot picture her *face*. And my friend Plotski, he seems quite distant.

Already it's Russian melodrama. He wanders to the stern, looks to sea, swigs mini vodkas. Soon, out of a forest of masts a motor vessel is seen to pearl its little wake in our direction. Boris has binoculars. Figures can be made out: one steering, one seated at back. He calls.

- Plotski is there, and Matty. But where is...

(Me) - Ten bucks says she's awol

(Marsha) - Yep, Marina the nobody.

Boris looks at us in surprise. But the little boat pulls alongside. Plotski, a fattish fellow in boatie shorts and garish shirt framing a hirsute chest, steps to the deck. Behind him, dressed in a multicoloured silken wrap, her hair held by a single frangipani bloom, stands Matty. Pausing for effect, she steps aboard, takes up a stance at the prow.

Suddenly from the cabin a figure emerges, stands upright on the wee craft as it tilts and wallows. She is dressed in a man's suit, black. Her hair is cropped at back. A long fringe clouds the face which is wide, white, unpretty.

- This is Marina Plotskaya, everyone. My Marina.

The girl is immobile. The effect is lurid. Everyone looks to Plotski her putative father. Boris says:

- Leonid, I did not recognise. She is much changed

- She is as she is. What do you think?

- We thank you for bringing her

- She has her own mind.

Matty stands, one hand on the boat rail, the other fingering beads at her throat.

The businessman says:

- She will not come aboard without your blessing

(Boris) - What blessing... does she need?

- She needs to know her worth is appreciated. And so do I.

Everyone frowns. Boris scrutinises.

- Friend, do you speak of money?

- Friend, I speak of affairs to be settled before happiness begins.

Marsha turns to face the sea. - All right. Okay.

She turns to Boris. - So this is what it is.

She faces the fat guy. - You have something for sale, Mister 'Plotski'? Something worth a debt?

He makes no reply. She turns to Matty.

- Darling daughter! Did you plan to get *married* today? Is this what we are to 'celebrate'? You... and this ugly lesbian?

(Plotski) - Who do you think you are sp-

Matty speaks: - No! Not ugly, as ugly as *possible*. Not evil but as evil as we can make her. Not a stranger but as strange as she can be. Not close, but closer than you'll ever be. (and she shouts) I'm getting *married today!* (then whispers) But not to her. Not to her.

We're rigidly focused now.

The mannish girl in the little boat, smiles.

Boris says: - Well, who are you getting married to? Who?

And Matty with impeccable grace, says:

- To myself. To My Self.

I smile, the only one who does. The coup de grace, and hurray for cracked families!

A faint breeze. The ocean furrows Marsha's glasses.

- What were you *thinking?* she says.

- Not thinking at all. Given up. Nothing.

And Matty leans backward over the rail. And drops into the water.

Plotski curses in Russian: - Keep yorr shitty plans to yorrself in future.

Boris cannot protest; he is stunned.

The businessman grunts, drags his boat in; and he and the man-girl Marina, who may or may not be his daughter, start to chug off in another direction. Marsha belatedly shouts at Boris to start the engine, go get Matty, call the coastguard! Yet Boris shrugs, fatally. She shoves him over the rail into the deep.

Do your job! she bawls. He flounders about under the keel, regains the platform, curses her.

- My phone is lost, idiot.

He mutters and drips. Blank, the spare-prick guy, pours him a drink.

And Blank the wanderer, plucks red-yellow flowers from the wedding spray, tosses them to the waters.

The girl Matty is swimming firmly now, toward the horizon, not the shore, in shark-infested waters.

Or they'll be dolphins knowing her luck. She floats. Blank takes binoculars, watches her get picked up by a buff-looking sailboard rider. She'll be whisked to land, on the appropriate currents and winds, and we'll see no more of her for the present.

. . . . .

Blank reflects. Victim Boris got corkscrewed into trying to prove himself to Marsha and Matty - because his ego required him to, because he's there. Your man Blank smiles inwardly, even feels a peck of empathy. Mother and girl are untouchable, combustible, guileful, feline, beguiling, elusive... and it's proper that we never master them. The pair ganged up on Boris as a matter of course, using his money. Not really vindictive, just instinctual. This makes me feel calm, more like a blank ledger, whereas Boris tossed up multiple blank cheques. Matty even said to him: 'Thanks for letting me spend

your dough so I don't turn into a carbon copy of my mother.' She will though, one way or another. Does it matter? Not really: it's entertaining, it's life. Meandering on its way.

No progress in this fake world! We scabble for our fingernail solutions, little victories. We dance in fire, immolate ourselves in the deep of our own labyrinth. Meanwhile, truth quietly bats away our dreams. We imagine there are endless tomes and tones of experience to be got. We wrap 'em about ourselves like the technicolor dreamcoat of a little baubled emperor who'll forever waddle on to thicker iterations of himself. But every hour, every minute we get lobbed in the face with a dirty fact: there's nothing but the in-your-face grind, the fake novelty of the present and its dumb thoughts, feelings, wants. It doesn't get any more complicated or easier than this eternal arising of done notions out of the borderless pit of the mind, forever here, forever *nowhere*. We think we can mould or mature our baubles, make the bad ones go away, make the nice ones stay. We inexorably fade, muttering low, and a great truckful of the same shit, rebadged and repurposed, is comin' down the highway in the form of the next generation, next incarnation, next ego. We've gotta laugh. But who can?

Like Schopenhauer we turn pessimist or like Marsha, super realist. Another way to avoid facts for a while: stay ignorant, be a wanderer, an *earnest seeker*. Call me naïve who cast a plethora of advice to his significant women! What does our Matty want? What does any female want? No answer pops up. This Marina coveted Boris's money (as did that scammer Plotski, intoxicated no doubt by his white-faced girl) and Matty was about to puppeteer them all in a bogus marriage. Now *there's* a creative clever sprite. In the end she'll need comfort, and friends. In time Marsha will turn a blind eye when she sees it's all loss and no gain, despite her having perfected the master egoist and punisher. She's part right though: there's only one way to deliver a lesson and maybe get one in return. That's to rope the bastards in and *sting*. A boat turns out to be the perfect place, since really we are all in the same boat. And we're all at the mercy of the sea. Here is Marsha's ancestral insight, her hard mercy.

I, Blank, had to let go of my little boathouse a week later, since the owner found Matty's little drug stash under my sunbed. Marsha enjoyed the irony and made sure to let me know. My response was to laugh. I do more of that these days.

### **Artist At Play**

There was a private thing that Blank was once part of, a solitary improvisation game where the player abandons all rules conventions predictions strictures objects, and instead does a thing like 'sing the cascading unfoldment of himself'. The actor in this game plays gatekeeper to a chthonic world where dreams and symbols bloom, and his art is a careless dream-flow, a heaviness, abandoning to the unthinkable, meditation of reckless doing. He comes in his way to the end of a road, to the end of need. He comes to a kind of genius, not the hollow myth of it, but a wild fullness of intuition-sense. His every fractated act is pure uncertainty, and he is totally gone, drunk in love. This high suppleness

only occurs as a play without rules, and to and from this child's play he returns as an emptied-out adult. Beyond the point and counterpoint of mental structures, the player is a gesturer of liquid possibility. Wherever his conscious attention is, there is his life. Yet if he dreams of doing art he's no artist at all. There is instead a bodily being who breathes the unseen, who wants nothing and doesn't even know what that is, yet who finds himself needing namelessly and who wants to live, and attaches himself to things that signify no possible kind of meaning. As if all he has, is to be a dancer in a subtle garden - yet in his play-pen there is endless ramification, endless juice of nuance and mathematical variable. He wants to only perceive, to judge nothing, to commune with an inner bloom that luminously appears in a conscious dream before his senses.

'...In this way (Blank writes), at a particular moment on a lost day on the attic floor of a derelict building in a big southern city... I came to my senses and could not help noticing that my body had formed a particular impression in the dust. Billia of particles, cumulated in aeons of dust-time in a silent blanket, had let me impress the ghost form of my body in it. And at the scintilla-point of now, I saw that a tiny incoherent or careless act would tragically disperse these particulates, to float on translucent air for days or years before settling again in some other unnamed dust ream, like sunbeams on the shore of a great unspoken sea. The doer would thus lay the great country of his body down in some other place, thereby scattering nebulae of dust in possibilities unfathomed, without end, without end. The protagonist Blank is immersed thus. He the mentor of these configurations that lie under him now mercilessly laughs that their shapes are never what they are, such is his serendipitously callous attitude to all arrangement; and he scatters worlds like confetti in the carnival of his mind, and infinitudes of thought chance are born and pass away in a single span of his breath, universes of glittering thought, if he allowed them to be known... but instead the player at this moment is occupied with one shape to the exclusion of all others - concerning the configuration of his body on a floor in a room, and of such dust that will be at his mercy there, as he lies musing and communing in a room on a bare floor in a southern city in a gone century. His name is BLANK, which is proper to a man who is nothing but the confetti of eternity, so that what he does is that which never was, because not measured, and therefore without sense. Here is the strange play of the protagonist. He is the fool who sneezes cosmos-galaxies, who utters flung eternity in the lost glittering of a roving eye that might catch a drift of particulates in sudden light, or might yet unseat inconglomerable dust in the emptiness of an incomprehensible never-dream...'

### **Wandering Beyond Wandering**

We are getting to the end of (no end of) stories... stories that somehow coalesced by ghost telegraph in the ether sea of the writer's romancing. There is no practical harnessing of these, and he has let the reader piece them together, or fail to. By some fumbling at intuition, our traveller Blank has taken himself to far places that might have acted like crystal balls or runes, wherein he might have gleaned

some insight, even transmitted it to significant others. He has required himself to walk as if naked, an unquiet ghost, as if a feather in space and time, a sackcloth and ashes *dharma bum*... This was his razor's edge, his plan without a plan. But even this has to end. For even if he will come to himself, that is, to the borderless eternal that is himself, he is sure that narratives never end, that there is in fact *only* narrative. And at last he must face the death of *romance*. To no longer hide in indulgement of the serendipitous and longing-lost, the faraway, the passing, the possible, the long-distance Woman, the self-induced specialness, the drugged romance of *absence*. The traveller fences no more with specialness or glory, and that may be his salvation if he lets it be, if he admits that the day has come when he is just another inglorious pilgrim-punter, swept up in the grim invisible tide of millions... that suddenly he is no more than an ant in a column of souls, and the ant-pilgrims are all wandering labouring trudging in a single direction, and the column is so long it has no beginning and no end. And it is no column at all, but a wave of human life, the wave of life itself.

The end of romance brings humility, they say. Following the worn pilgrim path, the traveller Blank comes at last to the high Himalayan plateau at Badrinath. He now admits that this narcissist who walks the paths trodden by the many can no longer *be*, and that he should be content to have dragged his cold-tired body with the thousands to take dust of some inscrutable shrine, feel his shivering smallness here in this high stone valley, gulp at scarce air, feel livid wind on his cheeks and ponder how to cope with the melancholy-dusk thought that the only way beyond, is down and back to plains of meniality and scatty future. Yet still he looks into these Tibetan and Nepalese and Indian eyes and wonders what lets them live on this earth, how they face every day without the cramming mental entertainments we westerners hide behind, how they sustain the simplicity of being inside their skin, how such keen strangeness as Blank feels in this high air (the novelty of rarefaction) for them is just the norm. But how can we live when nothingness is our norm, when we never shall be celebrated, when we know we are nothing but a gnat or butterfly of a summer's afternoon, a breath that cannot come again, a pebble pushed under night-cold rivers, ragged ripple-flag atop a cairn of stones begging at the upturned apron of sky? Blank envies the empty mud-faced asiatic ones, and that is why he is here under these fog-grey peaks granited in the sky, with cirrus cloud wasping over their stony faces like the vapid hair of a lone girl. He thinks to himself: 'It was always the bliss of limitation that sustained me, because I wanted to be special, always believed I was, even hoped that all of us might be (hail to our competing spirit), when I was a bubbly child with sturdy legs rummaging over grasslands in my antipodean home with my bow and arrow and hunter's certainty that I could run to the end of the wild and home again in time for tea. I always wanted to ascend to high mountains, to keep climbing into the blue vault, into higher winds, to gambol with the gods... The impossibility of it haunts me; the *possibility* haunts me. I feel there is no limit to anything, that I am boundless, that it is absurd to believe I am mere skin, that I have a tiny intelligence, that I am rooted to earth. For intelligence is the power that rams worlds out of its way as if they were mere dust on a blue wind,



intelligence shouts it is the thinnest of qualities, the rarest, the sharpest needle in infinity, by which even nano-particles are silly lumps of cosmic dough... Oh god my mind just climbed out of itself... and this is the danger of high mountain air: we lose the polarities that keeps us sane. And beyond the insane wild romance of wandering is the tranquil romance of *humility*. For humility is sanity. And herein is the *stillness* of wandering, wherein oneself 'is but the quietly trivial'. And yet the wind roiling in these high fields is not in control, nor is this flittery sunlight nor these pebble shoals in this slushing grey river, nor the willy-nilly flapping of prayer flags festooned about these temple towers! And I totter in this high impossible place, tread air, gulp wind, wrapped in my bundled scarves and breeches on a ragged stone road below a temple in a high valley, and mooch onward with herds of craggy men and shrouded women, wanting to be ripped by the howl of grace yet still needing to run to the lee for comfort-warmth, for the sake of my specialness, for my romance.'

Humility is properly the death of ego, the end of romancing. Yet *still* Blank tells himself he is the conscious centre, he that invites himself to flood in all dimensions: spaceless, out of time, ramifying forever in shaded dances of limitation and illimitation, of possibility on possibility, and that because absolute being allows absolute *ignorance*, it is his duty to be a warrior, a seeker, a traveller, that it is *he* who must do all of this...

...But now descends, in the fragrance of these upper winds, an *expansion* - out of the particular and bodily and conditional and pointilistic thought-racked churn of relativity... An expansion... the unfolding of himself into coolest clearness, into a transparent bodiless emptiness, into utterness, into borderless everness, wherein *he is no more*... 'My mind has been taken (and it is not my mind) into the oceanic, wherein every possibility is laid out now and forever, and That One has returned to the place from whence it wandered, and has seen that it makes no difference what has been or ever will be, because he is always *here*. This impersonal vision, somehow oneself. And I had thought that if I submerged in deep worlds I would *return* like a hero garbed in stars, and that nothing could ever be the same! No, the truth is, nothing ever changes. Why would anything change? Only the *attitude* may change, and this is unutterably subtle.

Now Blank is free to spin any narrative he wants, narratives that pull him to longed-for subtle dimensions, that may even signify arrival beyond wandering: yet preferring stray paths that lose themselves in a field, or streams that drown in the sea. These are delicate and absurd acts, transformed by humility, a wandering, the eternal writ as itself - now, here, present, local, trivial, real - and at once none of these.

'The ascended masters of whom the pilgrim seeks blessings (till he himself realises he is unconscionably, horribly free) dwell unseen in deeper circles of a great gyre. But I say that even their lot is no different, since everyone has to be somewhere, and must deal with becoming. Listen: I give

no proof that *becoming* is, since it is utter change and therefore without substance. But I say with certainty that *I am*, and that I scintillate and pulsate and create, since *I Am That* wherein all things have their uncanny presence, their form, their seeming, their ghostly dancing.

Some say there is a secret pathway between rock walls in the high valley of Badrinath wherein ascended masters dwell, though its seekers have called it impossible since there's no such crevice between the hills. But I say there is a way in, and that is when the inner master summons us. We will never come there by wanting or wishing or dreaming or even by looking. We are only summoned when the self-romance is over, when we cease to crave. The heart's craving is the genesis of all wandering, and when the subtlest craving is done, then we come to the place the heart only dreamed of. This is the eternal myth of paradise. Is arrival a paradox? It is possibly a romance!

My own high hidden valley (I don't know which dimension it is in) is a place where masterly people respect us and want to help, who really are role models but somehow are simply who they are, not half-corporeal spirits. It is an open place where waterfalls fritter down rock walls and feed a blue-ripple lake that drains in underground caverns, and where there is a pebbly beach and grassland with trees below the apron of mountainside, and dotted caves wherein sit the masters in self-generating light. And below these are orchards and gardens with kind animals who graze in the sunlight with intelligent eyes. And at the centre of it all is the everlasting fire, the *yagna*, in a gyre circle sculpted of ancient stones. And just nearby, there is a perfect boy of twenty summers with gold-red hair seated on a rock and smiling with a finger raised to blue heaven, and his feet are being anointed with oils and unguents and flowers by a girl his own age, and so peaceful is she that she might be the mother to all things. And here under a spreading tree I stand and watch them, and feel at last like myself. And each shared moment between us is the still eternal, each gesture is the everness, and there is only purpose and quality and simple grace.'

