

**See What  
You  
Think  
About  
This**

**By John Fellenor**

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# I

[...] It's a bit embarrassing. I'm worried about the stretch marks on my back. I know I'm a little overweight and should exercise more, but I'm sure they're getting worse.

Nobody says anything for a good fourteen seconds; an uncomfortably long time. Think about it or try it now with your partner: get them to say something and then count off four seconds by your watch before replying. Try it a couple of times so that you can look at each other and not the watch. What do you think about? Do you think about sex? Do you feel a perverse urge to do something obscene; pull down your pants and piss on the floor? Are you feeling like a freak wondering what's going on? Outside, the cars pass up and down. The air is hot. The window is open. The doctor says nothing: just looks at this lady in front of him and tries hard not to tell her that no fat people came out of the Concentration Camps. That despite everything she wants to believe about slow metabolism and inefficient digestion and the puppy fat and what your mother said about being like your Auntie Up North, the fact is, and this is the only fact: the fact is that if you don't put it in your mouth, it don't turn to fat.

He wonders about the stretch marks. They start to open up and gape like a cracking buckling pavement in an earthquake. Parts of her fat back fall away to reveal: another fat lady hiding inside! He nearly suppresses the smile but feels the corners of his mouth starting up, so turns it into some words. Come and stand behind the screen and lift up your shirt. I'm afraid the nurse is on her break so it's only me; you can wait for another appointment if you like. No no, says the fat lady. It's okay. She steps behind the white screen and lifts up her blue tee-shirt. Can you undo your jeans and pull them down just enough so I can see your hips. The doctor bends closer to examine the skin, which is white and pearly with shallow silver indents running round in elongated patterns. There's nothing redeeming about it. Just ugliness. Not the oh-so righteous signs of motherhood or any such placations. The lady turns slightly to the doctor: I know they're worse. They're deeper and I'm afraid they'll split open. I'm afraid I'll split apart! That comment catches the doctor by surprise. He stands up and imagines kicking the lady's fat-ass. Okay. Come back and have a seat again. The lady does herself up and sits back down with the doc. Now. I have seen worse stretch marks, he lies. And what I prescribed in that case was a steroidal cream applied twice a day. It helps the skin stay elastic and

repair itself more quickly. But it can also thin out the skin if it's over used, so you have to be careful. Really careful. More is not going to help, in this case. Now you can try that or you might try a good moisturiser first; does something similar but not the repairing. What about diet? He shifts in his chair. So does the fat lady. He takes off his black-plastic framed specs and rubs the pinch marks either side of his nose. She crosses her legs the other way. A fly hovers. What's it like? The lady looks over his head for inspiration, wants to look like she's gonna come up with a rational and well-thought out answer. It might be a downright lie but it's gonna be a good one. The doctor knows it's going to be a lie. The lady knows the doctor knows. So at the last moment, just before it gets to the uncomfortable boundary, she decides to come clean: well. I eat shit, really. The doctor says nothing. Gives a benign little smile. He's picturing the fat lady' with a hand full of shit; pressing it into her mouth. Makes a sound like he's pondering it over. When you say shit, I assume you mean mostly junk food; ready meals, cola. That sort of thing. The lady shifts in her chair; looks down at her feet. No. I mean: I eat shit. Dog shit. Cat shit. My own shit.



There was once a tree: thought to be extinct. A pine tree. A variety of pine tree. It was generally held that this particular variety of pine disappeared some one hundred years before, with the Great Migration. Pioneers out of necessity had cut up and cut down everything they could. Often to build their houses, to edge the roads, point to where they wanted to go. Often they cut things down because the things were there. They were good at cutting things down and they liked doing it. It became an end in itself. It dawned on some of the later Pioneers that the woods were ever more sparse, the animals much quieter. They decided to preserve what remained of the woods and the animals. They put up wooden signposts that said 'do not cut down the trees and do not hunt animals. Any of them'. It didn't work. The animals and the trees were gone. The Pioneers found other things to do. About twenty years ago, a young man was hiking across the open spaces that skirted the foothills with the mountains to the North. He spent the morning scrambling up the scree-slopes of one of the larger hills. At the top of the hill, around noon, he rested and ate some biscuits and drank some water from his silver metal flask.

As he surveyed the scene, listened to the birds of prey circling high above him on the thermals, his eye was drawn to an isolated patch of dark green on the opposite slope of the broad valley that lay before him. Maybe three miles away. The patch of dark green was the only object on an otherwise monotone beige-grey-beige background. The young man had come out into the wilderness because he had nothing better to do. He had all the time in the world to drift as the landscape demanded. He took off his light-weight shirt and pushed it down into the bag bundled over his shoulder.

It took half an hour to descend the hill and hit the flat valley floor. It took close to another hour to cross the valley and by the time the young man was beginning to make his way up towards the patch of green he could see that it was a lone thicket of pine trees. Twenty or thirty of them. Different heights but grouped tightly together. Nothing else around. Rocks. Tufted brown grass. The soft undulations of the valley slope, of which the assemblage of trees stood half way up. The young man climbed. The trees looked down to him and he looked up to them, pausing when he was near enough to take in the detail. The tallest pine stood close by. A thick trunk of red bark some seven feet in diameter, bereft of branches on its lower reaches. Vertical grooves ran down to where

the trunk fed out into thick, tumbling roots that for years had attempted to become the rock below. The tree pointed into the sky above, drawing the young man's gaze beyond the upmost boughs and on, and out, and into the blue. Insects crawled up the back of the tree. Out of the young man's sight: a red beetle. Under the rocks around the tree: grains of sand that the young man would never see. They were there. There were cracks in the rocks, pine needles caught high on the top side of the tree's branches. The young man couldn't see them. But they were there. Sugar water seeped upwards in the heart of the trunk drawn up microscopic tubes and turnings, xylem long and thin. Larvae burrowed along below the roots and turned every time they struck a smooth small pebble and then turned again and that's what they did until it was time to pupate. Because they had to become something else entirely. They just had to do that and no more. And worm-beetles drew beautiful patterns just under the tree's bark. But the young man would never see these things always and only just beyond his awareness. And he would never know the sinews of his own heart nor if they were even there. He could only assume and go on accepted wisdom.

Some years before, the young man had a Father. His Father had tried to explain, one day, to the young man, who was still at that



time a small boy that he, the Father, had to go out into the world. The young man didn't grasp it at the time but, nonetheless, the Father had tried to explain to the young man why he had to go. It was a matter of finding one's self. But whose self was to be found or where this self was, the Father couldn't be sure. He could only assume. Sometimes he explained that he was helping his son; the young man. Sometimes he seemed to accept that he was trying to do something for his own Self. The devoted young man became adept at reading in between the lines and accepted very early on that the Father could not give him a perfect version. But now, these many years later, and stuck on the illusion of wish and disappointment, the young man had found his way to this thicket of lost pine trees. One of which was the last of its kind. And the young man knew that story and had studied trees at University. He did not recognise the particular variation of tree that stood above him and which he now stood below and that was enough. It was significant. A squash bug moved into view. It moved and meandered from the back of the trunk into sight.



March Seventeen. Thinking about that body guard who got shot. A long time ago in a sunny place; working as the muscle for a bike magazine. He used to come into the office and talk bikes with the staff. Real nice guy; size of a truck. Always wore denim cut-offs and a beard. Oddly enough: no tattoos. Got shot with a small calibre gun that made the sound of a marble dropping on a stone floor. Rodman sits back against the wall and starts to die, looking across the street at a blue chop. Thinking about his Dad; if he was still out there selling things. Where was his Mother? Who shot Rodman? Same guy who played Joanie's pocket? Pushed her back on the green baize; sunlight picking up the dusty air. Never knew if it was a set up or just happened that way. Six men. Six pockets and Joanie and the green baize. Down the road: an old man dusts his path. Down the road some more: a man looks across to the rails and watches the train coming down out of the pass. Driver on the train talking to his mate; points across to the edge of the small town they start through. Joanie turns her head and watches the train through the window. The man pushes again. The keys to a blue chopper drop from his hand on to the floor. Rodman dies. A nice guy.

# I

This acts as some kind of nominal starting point. Because it was.

She crept upon me. In the sense that it took some time for me to acknowledge the feelings, over many months of just being there. Through a bombardment of attention that turned to paranoia. I should have taken time to think the paranoia through but didn't. It was just the way it was, so nothing unusual. Looking back, it was obviously the shape of worse things to come but I can't recall, now, what it was at that point. She was unreasonably attractive I remember, but if it ran any deeper then I'd defended against it; resisting the temptation to wonder. It never had been a physical thing and even now that wasn't on the agenda. I assumed the most entrenched of my values would hold sway and prevent me turning into some melodrama. I slipped into her like a void; a kind of gap that I folded in and upon with a little prodding and only a few weakly expressed objections. As being in a room on your own. An expanse of space that somehow gets pulled back to you by the things that are there. Things that seem important. So you go about touching these things and running your hands slowly over the textures. And you call up to the lights high above, to hear a

voice that comes back to you through the ears of another. Things make themselves apparent that seemed impossible up to then. The space endlessly folds over you and avoids being truly penetrated. The fear of her withdrawing and tumbling you out is at the same time happening and not happening. Full of little self-annihilations; dark meets light. A destructive embrace leaving a hole that won't be filled.

Does it mean that eventually I'll disappear altogether? Do you trust her? Do you trust what she tells you? It isn't an issue of trust because those circuits had been fused years before. They aren't in the question. They won't work. She's making me disappear. No I don't trust her then in that case. And the circuits come back on line. She's annihilating me by degrees. All that's going to be left are people trying hard to remember what might have been there. These same people are trying to help me now. They tell me to get out while there's enough of me left, while I can still straighten my back. But they needn't bother because I already know they're right; it's just that I don't want to exercise a choice. The colour of her eyes. That's what I see when I think about it. Blue eyes. Blue, pale eyes. They promise me things I'm too scared to take. Maybe she's only her eyes and the rest of her vanishes when they close. When she sleeps.

One day: I am in love with you. What could I do with that but recognise me? She laid down a million possible outcomes in one sentence. I took the option requiring me to lose things. The full extent of my loss hasn't been revealed yet but started like this: one weekend she goes away for some innocuous reason and the moment panics me. I decide that I love her and am obliged to feel its symptoms. That's what they are. Only symptoms invoked by permitting them a symbolic value. She weaves herself in and out of my thoughts as she chooses now. Across this crowded room she can see me sitting at a table. I watch her go to the bar and wait to be served. Occasionally she looks over her shoulder to me. She doesn't smile but just looks at me in a way I can't read. Each time she looks at me the bar man looks up at her. He looks over her body but misses the point. The men stood around at the bar gaze upon her too and they don't get it either. I take the cigarettes out my shirt pocket and lean back into the soft chair. The hot room makes me sweat under my jacket. So I take it off and let it fall beside me. My hands are up behind my head in an attempt to put me at ease. If I look laid-back then I'll be laid-back but it feels wrong so I sit back up and lean on the table again. She's still at the bar, visible every now and then between the men and women that have gathered. And then she begins to slip

out; pulling their gaze with her and walking towards me with a drink in each hand. Now she smiles at me a coy kind of smile that I choose to read as: do you know what this is about today? Unfortunately I don't. And then that wave of closeness hits as she puts the drink lightly on the table and sits down. I'm glad we're here. And I take up my part in this alternate version.

What had happened the night before? Same as usual. Got overwhelmed again. Got worried that I might hurt you and now I don't know how not to. She dismisses it, saying that it's okay because I can go back to things as they were anytime I choose. Meaning what? That she can't go back? That she can't deal with the hurt? I try and hold her gaze, try and lose me in her eyes.

We walk slowly along the river, hand in hand under a fading blue sky. The last warmth of the day leaves the ground, pulling mist from the surface to float closely over the dark water. When did this happen I ask her? But she doesn't answer. Just squeezes my hand, but it's enough. If I dive in and swim to the bottom, will you still be here when I come back up? Of course. I'd wait for you. Show me what you wrote. Okay. I will show you what I wrote. I wrote this:

## II

On the edge of a main highway that runs through a small desert town. Chevron parking space and flat front shops. It's bike week. A million bikers take over the town and parade. That's it: they parade. They drink at night and hit each other sometimes. A biker comes up to me and explains how he's been raggedy for a long long time. I tell him he's meant to look like that. In the day time the bikers get up - eventually - and parade. This involves getting on the bike, revving the engine loud enough so that everyone knows you're about to parade. You don't rev it so much that you throw a piston. You rev it enough to harvest a few glances; start the little parade going. You allow enough time for a few more people to stop expectantly. This isn't an unexpected 'I really can't imagine what will happen next', expectation. It's part of the parade. If you've left your bike in a choice position then you can drop the gear shift, let out the clutch, give it the throttle and bang it straight out onto the main drag. You slip around on the seat a little; a bit to the left. A bit back to the right. You're making it look like you're easing yourself down as one with a horse and galloping out of town in the Good Old Days. You may crick your neck a bit to the right and a bit to the

left. It's all part of the parade. True: it does feel like you're doing it to become one with the machine and get your mind extended round those gears. It's actually part of the parade. It takes about ten minutes – along with the millions of other bikers doing the parade- to complete the circuit. That is: you go up to the north of the town where the buildings slowly drip out into the desert, you swing round the back road that takes you past the base of the old mine, you pop in the south end of town. You parade. The narrower side streets all running off at right angles present an alternative and sometimes you can watch a chopper chug up to the north of town, watch it reappear out the street behind you, cross the main drag, break off right, pop back down from the north. So on and so on. There's nowhere to go but what you really want to achieve is this feeling of going somewhere. Having people see you are going somewhere and going there with a purpose. A really important purpose. This purpose is more than visiting a long-lost friend on a thousand-mile road trip. It's not the long ride to your Father's funeral. It's something else. None of the bikers know what the purpose is. So they parade in lieu of the purpose; a place marker. They parade sitting down watching other bikers' parade in slow-ish motion. You can watch a biker haul himself up from a patch outside the central bank, breath in



deeply. Stretch his self a little to the right. Crick his neck to the left. Let out a sigh which you might expect from one of the Old Timer's going out to face something he doesn't understand and doesn't want to. Maybe a couple of passing bikers, already with the parade, anticipate a space for him to step into. You can watch him head up the main drag to the north, wait a while. He pops out behind you, down one of the right-angle side streets. You can watch him wait for a lull in the parading bikes. He crosses the main drag and vanishes down past the central Post Office. He'll pop out some time and somewhere later. That's about it. The parade lasts a week, like I said.

### III

We stop at the next bench, only a few yards away and she sits gently. We sit close. Our shoulders touch and she leans in to read the writing together. It's about being in the bar, what happened and what happened after. We turn to the last sheet because we both need to know. It says that we go out for an evening together. In fact we're meant to go to the party. Maybe we do maybe we don't; it isn't very clear. I ask how she feels about the people at the party. I know how she feels about one of them. He isn't the same as me she says and I shouldn't worry. So I worry. If she likes him and she likes me too then we must share some aspect. My dislike for him taints me, makes me afraid that she'll start to see me the same because after all: he's where I'd probably end up. But we leave the party behind quickly and he and I aren't resolved. We walk through the streets, laughing, stopping to look in the shop windows. On a corner a young girl plays a flute and the music flutters around the architecture of these old buildings. It hides behind pillars and flits lightly as some mischievous fairy. The whole air is lifted and others stop to smile. We stop. She watches the girl and I watch her, missing the point. That is: I am missing the point.

Somebody asks me if time has stood still and I reply that it has.

We stand for some time and then walk on. It's very warm for late in the day. I ask if she likes dancing and she wiggles her hips at me with a grin. I take it as a yes. I know this club, I say, we can go and dance later, when it's dark and I won't be able to avoid touching her. It's what happens after the dance that I can't decide on because I know it has to come crashing down around us because if we dance, if we touch in a certain way then we end right there.

The weight presses down on me, urging me to what I'm not yet become. You can change it right here, but the words to reply fail me. Instead, I put my head down and start to walk. I know where I am, I say. She's behind me when we come to the bar. I stop, only because of the music coming out the door, not because of her, I think. The tune is familiar, and the trumpet handles it well. He stands under a spotlight, illuminated for just a moment, just long enough to lay down this bed of dark purple velvet for the audience to sink into and roll themselves up in. That's me up there I tell her, but the trumpet turns to me and smoothes over my words so that she won't hear. That's me. That's what I was. I remember, a long time ago maybe, but what I was comes back and I look at me and feel whole for just a short time. Let me get us a

drink. She turns to me quite suddenly. I agree and she goes off to the bar. I watch the heads turn as she passes by. The bar man pretends not to notice her approach and runs a hand through his hair, rubs his nose. I take the cigarettes out my shirt pocket and lean back into the soft chair. The hot room makes me sweat under my jacket, so I take it off and let it fall beside me. My hands are up behind my head in an attempt to put me at ease. If I look laid back then I'll be laid back, but it feels wrong so I sit back up and lean on the table again. She's still at the bar, visible every now and then between the men and women that have gathered about her. And then she begins to slip out, pulling their gaze with her and walking towards me with a drink in each hand. The heads turn in the opposite direction as she walks back to me. This time, she comes around my side of the table and puts the drinks down, and then she stands there. Smiling at me. So I move over and she eases herself down onto this big soft chair right by my side, pressed right up against me and is still smiling at me intently. Blue eyes. Blue, pale eyes waiting for something. If I kiss you now, if your lips touch me. I feel her hand on mine. That's okay I had already decided. It's not a problem. And she leans slightly in to me, tilting her head. She filters out the last vestiges of illusion and the trumpet stops and

the people step back into the shadows spilling out of the walls. I know her body so close; as if we had never been separated many aeons before and if I lean into her, the universe starts to go back. I follow the contours of her chin to a delicate cheek and then back to her gaze and then I lean in to her so that our lips are barely apart. I would end here, I think.

## IV

And after the bar? What happened after the bar, he asked. I saw this bride, at midnight, standing still; in front of the church. She was part of the moon. Had come down to see what the earth was like. So I stopped to go and talk to her and she told me that there were people still waiting. I was unnerved. I enquired to admire her beauty; which she didn't mind at all. She stood silently whilst I moved over her, immersed in tranquillity. Though soon she began to fade and bade me fair well with a smile. The cobbled stone under my feet shone faintly and then I was left alone in the dark. What was that then? I don't know, I replied.

He was stood leaning against the wall with his arms folded and head turned away from me. Looking off into the distance across the shallow valley below us. Was it her or was it something else? It was probably both, I think. He moved to look over the wall, down to the earth below. I don't really like heights, I said. I feel drawn to the edge. I don't like the oldness of these stones either. I don't like the green on them. They look wet and slippery and that means I could slip. But the floor isn't like that. Just the walls. I didn't reply; just raised my eyebrows. I'm going down, I said, and started back to the narrow staircase. It

was so steep and dark I wondered how people hundreds of years ago ever managed it.

Every now and then I'd pass somebody coming up the other way and had to squeeze me up against the wall. These other people might be attractive. I hoped, but they never were. More often they were plain and fat. I figured if I waited round long enough I could watch one have a heart attack. A fly flitted past my eyes and made me slip in front of a middle-aged couple. The man suppressed a smirk. I thought I'd let them know it wasn't usual for me to slip. I say: woah! Won't be making a habit of that! The man unbuttons a smirk and laughs in relief, albeit briefly. You slipped, he says; reassuring himself. We stood outside looking up at the great stone tower. It made me feel almost as giddy looking up as I had looking back down. Did I slip? Yes a fly flew past. No I didn't get hurt. What do you think of these tourists, I asked him? We're tourists. But not like them. We don't look like tourists, do we? I don't know. Perhaps we do. We must; we're looking about like them, going to the same places. You know. Who can tell? But we feel differently don't we. He didn't answer but looked at me blankly. I don't think he cares at all. His face was growing a good beard, making him look tired. His dark hair was messy. It usually swept over to one side looking quite smooth but now it stood up in the middle and was

flattened on the other side; how he slept. Well if we're tourists then you're one that's fraying round the edges. You look washed up! So do you, he says. In fact you look like you've been waiting too long. You're starting to look like the scenery round here. You're blending in! He grinned a big one-sided grin. No malice. But you said we look like tourists. Yeh! The tourist who stayed. Went native. But then you always were native weren't you? Couldn't separate yourself from the picture. Couldn't turn away. That hurt a little. So I told him: that hurts. Why? He asks as if he doesn't know. Let me think about that. Why does it hurt? When were we last here I wondered. And in what circumstance? Was she with me? I wanted her to be. What did it feel like then? It felt like I'd been left on a planet in another solar system. It felt like I was made to wander through space, dropped off at some point across the universe and someone says: okay. Now go home. And I didn't know which way to start. There are no signposts. You take one step forward into the blackness so thick that I might have torn my eyes out and one step later I can't tell if I had moved at all. Or just thought about moving. I was never going to find her again, was I? She never was with me. I never got back from that place. I'm still there trying to move this way. So you hurt because you never found her. Or you hurt because you lost her?



Are you talking to me? What are we talking about here? I was wondering if you've lost her. Have we? Well that's what we're doing then isn't it! We're waiting for you to get back and when you do we'll know. Where am I you fuck? I shouted it again; felt my face contort. He spun round surprised. What's up? What the fuck was that? You were shouting at me? Genuinely surprised, he tells me I was shouting at him. And then I ask him a question to which he answers no. Do you feel all right, he asks. He looks concerned and frowns down his nose at me. I'll feel all right when I hear her voice. When will that be? He says he doesn't know, says he's sorry and looks down the hill and then starts to walk. The breeze follows him.

The path leads down from the tower, through the oak woods all about. Only the top up here is open and the breeze springs out from behind the tower whipping down on the woods so that they move like fur on some tremendous hunched creature. I watch him pass under the canopy and disappear along the hidden path. If I wait long enough she'll be on the breeze. She's behind the tower waiting for a dramatic entrance. My left leg moves. I want to walk round to grab her. I know she's there, but, just as soon as she made herself felt, she changes again. Images of desolation flit through my eyes and the shadows creep about me. It's only a thought.

I'm under the trees walking by his side. The wet gravel crunches. So we got to the car and drove.

Watched the hill out the left window appear and disappear with the trees. I was glad to be on the wide road, back with other people and settled comfortably into the driving seat; playing some familiar taped music. We talk about what music does and theorise how people are drawn into a feeling just because of a tune. I suggest that mood dictates what we listen to but he counters this, claiming that sometimes we hear a tune and our mood changes accordingly. We start to talk about talking. We talk about the illusion of will that we all cling to; that the player had nothing to do with our choice of conversation topic. It's nice. A moment out of the regular pattern of things.

We pass the time. The car eats up fifty miles of road without a murmur. Then fifty more. It cruises comfortably at seventy miles an hour and sounds like it's only just ticking over. I remark how smooth it all is and that it's the first Production car I've been in and that if it's typical of Production cars then Production cars must be good. I say it looks good in black. All black. The hills shrink behind us and we start out onto flatter, drier countryside. Grey with fields of skinny cows here and there. Lots of farms. I imagine from their number and closeness to one another

that none are of large acreage. I wonder if anybody has any money at all around here. The small towns are haunted by a past that went missing many decades before and appear as the remnants of the bad dream. A baleful backdrop waiting to join a play in which the main characters shuffle around mumbling things that might stop your heart if heard properly.

Down through one town we pass along the wide main-street with the white buildings on either side peeling into dust. Windows of filth hiding filthy people. Filthy doors open to let the apathy out into daylight. And from there it slowly spreads to the next town and then the world. He says that the people in these towns work themselves to death scraping the fading land. I want to stop. The car slows down. We stop outside a building that stands on its own with two wide alleys either side of it. We park in front with plenty of space to choose from because no-one else has bothered. He climbs out and stretches. He doesn't really know this area at all and yet he's at ease. He's at ease wherever he goes and I'm not. He stretches and yawns with his head back. I climb out and stretch and yawn and look around. This is a café we're in front of. It's clean in comparison. This café has some standards, I think. He pushes back the wide glass door and in we go. This isn't my natural line of work. I just fell into it.

## V

I wait here every day for somebody to come in. Someone new from out of town, and every now and then someone new appears. And these two are new. They're about my age and they both look friendly. They stand just inside the door looking about and wondering where to sit. I wonder if they'll wait for table service or come over to me. I'm tired. I don't want to look tired. My dress is clean and my hair is neatly tied into a tail. I smile at them waiting for them to catch my eye and smile back. One of them catches my eye and smiles back at me, quickly flicking up his head and eyebrows in a friendly way. I like his smile. He'll order a coffee. I think black coffee. The other one is smiling at me now and when I return the smile he starts towards me; looks away at the walls and ceiling. They both come up to the counter. I quickly check to see if it's clean and it is. The Boss doesn't care what this place looks like but I do. I know the outside needs cleaning and painting but inside I keep it clean and as nice as I can. It would be nice to get some table cloths. I think it would be better if we could get a set of matching vases and put one on every table with a flower in them. The flowers would have to be fake because nowhere sells nice flowers. If I could get them I'd put a white

rose in each. They look nice and have bit of tradition to them. Yes we have some soda and it's been cooled and the toast is good and so is the bacon and it comes with salad if you like and you can have eggs too. The eggs will be done how you like them and are always nice and rich. They look round still wondering where to sit. They go back towards the door and sit by the window. I watch them. Fuck you both. Fuck you both, you shits.

I watch the woman behind the counter trying to catch his eye, but she catches mine first and I smile at her. Sometimes I walk into a place and hope that she'll be inside. Sometimes I walk into a place and hope that somebody inside wants to know me. Hopefully female. Petite and attractive with dark hair and for once: here she is. She must want to know me. That smile so warm it must be for me. It means she wants to be friendlier than a cup of coffee. Can I pretend? Will you come with us on our journey and leave behind whatever you have to leave behind? She straightens up a little and smoothes down the sides of her flowery dress. She leaves with us and gets in the back of the car. She asks me to get in the back and fuck her while he drives. She asks me to kill her and roll her into a ditch. She brings our food out of the kitchen and puts it down with that warm smile. It looks as good as she said it would. We both smile at her and she smiles at us. He

smiles at me and flicks his eyebrows up and I smile back at her again. She goes back behind the counter and starts to wipe down where the food briefly stood. I want her to look back at me but now she's going back into the kitchen. In the kitchen the cook slaps her face with the back of his hand, making her fall against the large steel sink unit. But she's used to that. The eggs taste fresh and the undersides are not crispy.

Out of the window I watch the town. This same sky, so blue and clear, connects straight to somewhere where I should be by now. How many people, having misplaced something or someone, have looked up to the sky or the moon or the sun and told themselves that the lost object watches the same view from another perspective? He tells me something. I agree with him. I ask him how his food tastes. He replies that it's okay. He eats out of necessity and not for pleasure. He eats quickly like it's another chore to get out the way. I like to sit and think and eat so that when everyone else has finished I haven't. It struck me some time ago that I could make a career out of eating slowly and notched it onto my carefully conceived idiosyncratic character. Truth being I couldn't care whether I ate fast or slow or slopped it all down my front like the mental patients I'd been privileged to meet. Under this blue sky

we both sit and eat and under the same blue sky she might be.

He asks me if I want anything else. Seeing as he's finished I guess that he's hungry and tell him to order some more waffles. I watch him go over to the counter and the waitress look up and smiles. He takes a long time to order waffles. They talk. He's not interested in her. She's not interested in him. They just talk. On the metal counter is a container of wooden toothpicks. He picks one and, holding it in his lips, rolls it from side to side, occasionally pulling it out and gesticulating with it in a short downwards motion. The toothpick gets more animated. When he sits back down there's an agitation to him; unease in his brow. I ask him what she said. He doesn't answer immediately and looks out the window. Whatever she said he obviously didn't like it. So I ask him again but he doesn't get a chance to answer. The Boss, and maybe this is also the waitress' husband, bursts out of the kitchen. Scumbag slob with black hair curly. Flat nose. Grease. Stubble. Fat fingers poke the waitress back against the counter as far as she can go. She tries to push out the other side and away but can't. Only ghosts pass through solid material. She must have pissed him off big time, he says to me. What shall we do? I think about it. I slow time down a little so that I can work out what to do for the best. Then I run it fast forward

so that I appear by her side and the Scumbag stops poking her and glares at me. This is another in a recent line of firsts: have you ever had someone shoot you in the face before? Not to my knowledge he replies. And before I could raise the gun properly he produces this chopping knife and slashes at me. So I shoot him in the throat. It doesn't kill him but it does make him mad. And probably scared. And with blood bubbling through gritted teeth he slashes again. I shot him in the head that time. And once more in the stomach. It doesn't bother me much. I sigh a little sigh that gets lost in the remnants of breath passing from his lungs. I don't find it in me to feel sorry for him. Or me. I stare a while. Messing with time. Speeding it up and slowing it down and we all get different effects.

The girl doesn't move. In fact, she's now part of the counter; she'll be around here for years. You can tell when a girl's in that fantasy space: the face says it all. I look down at my clothes to see if any blood spatters got me. Then I pull the photo out of my pocket and stare vacantly into the kitchen. The glass windows on the swing doors need a clean. They're yellow painted with a layer of yellow cigarette tar. I hadn't noticed that earlier. They really are messy; standing out against the spotless serving area. I can't see what this man had been doing just before he died.



But he was definitely pissed off. I stood a while knowing the photo was in my hand, anticipating it. I knew well that feeling I'd get when I looked down. The boy was still sat staring into the distance, with the cloth sack at his side; holding the top with his right hand; turned slightly towards it. The sack was all he had now. His world was in it, I could tell. He picked it up and looked after it for the next five years and only put it down again when it was time to mourn the sister he'd lost. She was still next to him with her head under the shopping bag. I hoped, each time, she slept. I hoped the bag wasn't hiding what I knew was there but the stillness of the legs, the position of the right arm: they belied the life left behind and so I mourned her on behalf of the boy, every time. One day I'd look at the photo and the sister would sit up by the boy, who would have put the sack to one side and they'd be smiling and talking together. But not today. This guy I shot had postponed that. As usual. The photo goes back in the breast pocket of my jacket. I put my hand on it on top of it on the outside of my jacket, just to let the boy know I'm always thinking of him.

Does the girl want to come with us and get fucked and killed? She wants to stay fused to the counter. I ask her why this guy was mad at her. I don't think she'll see things the same now. Turning towards the table and the door:

He's up and smiles to the girl and waves goodbye. He holds the door for me and we walk outside. I shouldn't impose like that; he grins at me. The buildings around criticise me. They creak back a little. Murmurs of disapproval come quiet from within. I don't feel sorry for me. I never feel sorry for people. I feel sorry for the objects that suffer an imprint of my passing. The images I leave behind me. A trail of snapshots. Moments of panic on surprised faces that fly up and get absorbed by the land in a way that changes it for generations. Until the coloured images fade and the land forgets. As I pass, other people's images long forgotten by the land seep back out and creep upon me. I know what went on in these flat open plains. In the woods and hills around them. I know what happened to the earth for the last ten-thousand years and that's what makes me feel sorry. The seeping images feeding into me are same ones I leave behind. We drive out of town. The police don't bother.

Rain hides the road from us and all the other drivers struggling to find a way. They bunch around for comfort and between us we push aside the clouds for some long time. The clouds, struggling to find a powerful form, eventually lose their vigour; turning to rain elsewhere. I don't like the water left on the road. I worry the car will slide and the land hems us in; the greyness unbroken by any

significance. Grey images shower the car. Some get through the glass and I can see the people on them. They draw to me and leave him alone. He pretends not to notice. There's a figure by the side of the road. Tattered. Stood wet and stamping its foot on the wet ground. Getting larger and darker. Straggly hair, maybe, or it might be some rags flapping and torn. Or tendrils? The figure looms close to the windshield. It wants to hurt me. It recedes behind the mirror. The receding figure draws the water off the road and all of a sudden we're dry! The image trail dries up too. The rest of the journey is uneventful.

## IV

People talking in the hotel bar. A couple maybe mid-sixties. Four men all about thirty and dressed in suits. They sit at the four sides of a table; leaning in, talking quietly. The man with his back to me holds the floor; the other three listen intently. They drink soft drinks and want to stay sober. One of them catches my eye and knows something about me. He nudges the man to his right and he turns. His eyes settle on the bar, pass over the old couple and then pass over me. But his gaze is just a little too long to be casual. I try to look disinterested. I meet his gaze and then focus past the men to the door and the foyer beyond. The hotel is okay. Bright and airy. The furniture's clean and new and stylish without really trying. The soft chairs square brown suede effect. I have chairs like it. And my lounge carpet is the same rusty orange. The men talk on. Do you want to come outside and listen to the birds, I ask. I wait for a reply. He finishes sipping at his beer. Puts down the glass and lets out a long relaxed sigh. Rolling his eyes and head back he looks at me; some misguided but well-meaning kid. The birds are asleep, he laughs. Not quite. Still only dusk. There'll be a few up and looking sideways about. I want to hear them chirping. He insists that the birds

are all tucked up in bed and tells me to go and check; he'll buy us another beer. I get composed. Check out the group of men. The couple. The barman shines a glass. I stand up slowly, trying to achieve a fluid motion so that no one notices me sliding out the door.

I stand by the open door and check over my shoulder. The men are still sat talking. No-one hiding in this foyer. The doors rotate me outside. I hadn't realised how noisy it would be. The inside was so quiet. I walk across from the hotel; there's a garage just across the way and some green beside it. Might hear some birds there. Outside is warm. The air carries fumes over from the large road. I can feel the black particles coating my skin and eyes making the garage look all hazy. I like the vapours though. I like gasoline and fuel oil. They wrap me into the air and make me feel welcome. It gets layered over with the tire noise and maybe some music from the garage. Neon teams with white window-light, red tail light and passing flashes of yellow-orange. They push upwards and keep dusk at bay. Near the garage I can hear the birds. They don't keep the same hours. They're street wise and hang around on corners looking for an argument. But the song's the same. They ask me what's up. Nothing's up. At the moment. Mind if I stand here? Sure, go ahead and see what happens. The birds talk away and I breathe in the gases. Cars

come and go off the large road and into the hotel car park. A woman walks across the small slip road and to the hotel. We're right on the edge of town and the edge of some semi-industrial area. It's all busy despite the lack of obvious inhabitants. The buildings down the slip road vary in shape and size. Some are white industrial units with metal roller doors. A couple may be apartment blocks; recently converted from vacant shells; now filled with vacant selves and a lack of furniture. Behind me a noise gets my attention. Kids are outside the garage door. They're young only about eighteen. All of them black and wearing vests, baggies and bandanas. Are blacks naturally more muscled than white people? Most of the black kids I see have hard sculpted bodies. They carved themselves out of the earth. I guess. Noticed. Don't look at me. I might kill you. So are we going to buy something? Or are we all going to kill each other? I evaluate the situation, not really inclined to go into the garage; nothing I need. But fuck these kids for hanging about. I go into the garage; open the door outwards and the kids don't move; they don't care about me? Look around for something to buy but can't get to grips with chocolate-bar language. I choose something vague and take it to the counter. The guy mumbles something, I throw him some money, and I own a chocolate bar. Birds go

quiet when I step back outside. They huddle close and start whispering to each other; one of them nods towards the kid in the back to front cap. Hey! Put your cap round the right way and you can have this chocolate. It brings the consumer untold powers and for the right individual untold attraction over the gender of your choice. I have to say that, I tell him. There's no guarantees, these days. Don't want to upset you do I? As if I care. Suddenly it occurs to me that I may not actually have any social skills. I stand looking at this boy and I think I'm cool friendly funny the works. He doesn't think that but looks confused and one of his friends' steps up for a closer look. Then another and another. Got to get your inspiration where you can. I look up to the bird for a hint. He's got a mean look in his eyes. Take out the one on the far left. Don't shoot him. Kick him in the groin and make sure once is enough. See what the others do. If they don't move: grab the next one along by the throat and slap him like a girl; on the cheek. Slap him again and see what they do. If the first kick doesn't pay off and they go for you, then just do what you can. If/then. Good advice. At least three will go down before you. Just keep a lid on the power. There's no need for it here. It isn't warranted. Black kid smiles at me.

The birds are still up, I smile at him. Where did those men go? What men he asks? He

says he didn't notice; had his eyes closed listening to some light sounds the barman had put on. Old couple are still in their beige cotton-mix windproof jackets; stay pressed pants. They could actually be one person split in two; one-half took the blood-red lipstick and the other took the wig. They may be harmless. Sitting back into the chair I get a moment of peace. Hey! I'm going up when this beer is done. He says he'll turn in too. That tomorrow I can drive and he can watch the grass. I chug down the remainder, give him a wide like I mean it smile, check the lounge with a quick turn of my head, pass the bar and the bar man, smile like I don't mean it, wide stairs: credit card key: bathroom.

I pull the chrome stool from the side and place it in front the bathroom mirror above the basin. The pearly lights sat around the mirror-edge light me up like a movie star. My face is shadow free. The skin monochrome. No more than a movie-still clipped from the reel. A movie star in a clean white-nothingness movie, with no soft furnishings. Where's the psycho? Lurking behind the door. Where's the hero? Lurking behind the door. Where's the heroine? I wonder what happens in this scene and stare into the actors eyes. The camera pans in slowly so his face fills the frame. The audience has to work at his thoughts and stitch the look into what came before and after. 'Remember the



ringing in your ears', the actor says. He looks down, reaching for something the audience can't see. Puts a cigarette in his lips, cups his hand round it and the hidden match flares brightly, revealing shadows clinging to his brow. You must listen. Listen intently to the sound in your ears. It's a carrier signal. The message is layered into it. You have to separate the two. Turn the signal into the message. The message tells you about it. Follow what the message says. It's easiest to separate the message when you're lying-down. Go and lie down. He takes a long draw on the cigarette and holds the smoke deep inside before letting it jet out his nose. You need the message before you get to the city. Go and lie down. Okay. Something out of shot catches the actor's attention and he turns away. A muffled voice. He turns back to glance at me one last time; makes sure I'm still there and then moves out of shot to reveal the white room, itself free of shadow. I stare into the space for seconds. Just the whiteness. A closed door. One. Two. Three. The closed door. One. Two. Three, the black shape rushes past the camera. I don't see it coming and recoil out the way; the audience breathe in sharply and sit back in their seats clutching their arm-rests. It's out of shot but only just. The audience know it. I know it. It's going to come back past and we close our eyes not wanting to see. It stands to one side of the

frame and watches us. It knows already who it will choose and why. A spotlight appears on the ceiling; faint at first but getting closer and bigger until the beam of light breaks free; breaks down to wash over a boy sat in the middle. The audience turn to look; surrounding him on all sides. The beam gets brighter; forcing the boy to clutch the arm rests of his seat. The space around him elongates and multiplies. And soon the void is infinite. The boy is an eternity away from us at the centre of an expanding universe; a point in the centre of our consciousness. I speak to him. You are infinity, I say. The boy turns to look at me. You are infinity. I watch me appear at the centre of the void.

Together we look up to the screen; formed to a black hole that sucks at us; drawing light from the people at the edges of the universe. They bend like saplings against a storm. It's coming. Springs from the black hole; forms itself from negative light and immense gravity to annihilate me and the boy. He'll stretch the state of death across time and space. It's her, the boy says through his tears. He looks up at me. His nails bleed. The bone has broken through the knuckle forcing itself down into the chair. It is not him; it is her. I glance up to the screen that bulges now towards us. Apprehensive of the move into shot. The boy sobs and I turn back to his eyes. Can we get back, he asks me. Are you sure it

is her? Yes. She's outside. I don't want to die. Nor me, I reassure him. I indeed decide that I don't want to die at that time and grab the boy by the wrists, pulling his hands back from the seat. The nails fall off and blood runs freely down the arm rests to pools on the floor. The boy's eyes are wide like saucers, staring up past me, telling me that it's in shot. Screams sing around the universe, from the audience. I slip my left hand under the boys legs and pick him up into my arms; left arm round my neck. Head buries itself into my shoulder. I don't look behind me. We can make it to the edge, I tell him. The black forms itself into a shape we understand and draws first our skin. Then the muscle, then our blood. Leaving exposed the depth which it anticipates as a moment of true completeness. A moment that will fulfil expectation.

It pauses as we watch ourselves from the edge of infinity. The boy has clenched his hands to hide the damaged fingers and as I reach out to put my arms around his shoulders, we watch, eviscerated, and then sucked into nothingness. When it is done, she looks up. Looks across at us across the immeasurable void. For an infinity we are watched. And for infinity I watch back. Nothing. Nothing at all. We are nothing at all. And then after infinity, a pin prick appears in the void. It's at the edge of the

universe a universe and infinity away. But I can see it. I check again: I can't see it. But I know it's there. I check again: I don't know it's there. But the pin prick of yellow is there and even though I am nothing I begin to move towards the pin prick, travelling, for aeons. No awareness. No anything. The boy: he has crawled out through a small square frame and is taking up a different version. I watch the square fade away until, eventually, the black light and the white light cancel each other out and he is split off for good. I travel from all directions towards the pin prick which I now can see exuding a faint yellow glow. It doesn't change in size but it changes in intensity and we converge on it. Yellower and yellower we start off. We can feel our form taking shape. We are then the pin prick itself. And then I can say 'I'. I am the pin prick. I am Yellow. I am dust. My first awareness is of a telephone ringing. I don't know at that time what it is. I find out much much later that it is a telephone.

## IV

The dirt falls from the shovel all too slowly. I swear it doesn't want to cover her body: it keeps slipping off to the edges. It's dry and crumbly; full of dry pine needles from the trees above me. They lie all around stacked neatly and all pointing in the same direction; stacked like tiny dried-out souls. And every time I turn the shovel over the earth tries to float up and away, refusing to take part in my crime. Her face floats to the surface of the dirt. With the life mashed out of it; an obscenity in purple; stamped with a pound hammer, left eye socket crushed, left eye missing, dark bloody hair stuck down over the hole; an odd reprisal of her once vogue style. You do look odd I say to her, half expecting the right eye to open in positive acknowledgement which, of course, it doesn't. It's a peculiar feeling. Common sense urges us to think about murder in a certain way: I imagine having committed the crime and then imagine I'd feel all cut-up about it. That imagined guilt prevents the majority slipping into homicide or similarly frowned upon acts. I was going to say criminal but remember that it's only criminal in the particular light of our history. Blame someone two thousand years ago; whoever put it all together and the rest that let it stew and simmer for the next

couple thousand years until the murder exists only on a piece of paper in a lawyers hand; beating a woman with a lump of metal and watching bits fall off is another matter altogether.

More dirt slips off the dainty left foot. I don't feel the guilt. A light wind stirs up the tree tops as I get to shovelling with a passion. I look around every now and then to make sure no-one's crept up behind a tree; to put a gun to my head; tell me to get foetal in the hole, or maybe to creep off and creep back with a plane-load of enthusiastic police. This is real? I put down the shovel to lean in the car: gonna lift your mood no-matter what you're into. Say hello to your new son, in a magic world! I just can't help but rest both hands on the shovel and sway from side to side. I sing along as best I can, trying hard to make it come out like I don't care, when really I worry more about the people behind the trees realising I can't sing than realising I nearly finished burying somebody's daughter who once got a doll with blonde hair for a present, and was really happy. This may be the most profound moment in our lives, I say. Every moment's built to last in a magic world!

How much further are we going? The steering wheel sways gently side to side in time with the music; we pass along gravel-covered single-track, skirting the edge of the trees. Nearly there. I thought a walk in the woods



tee-shirt. Sits with knees hunched up, but in a relaxed way. How do you think it's going? I ask. She screws her face up a little and pauses. Sucks some long air through pursed lips. Well, to be honest, it's a bit laboured. Bringing me up here and all that. Could have just strangled me from behind in the garage, or just stabbed me.

Some time ago I watched a lady give my dog away: a biter. He would bite on command if I asked. One day the dog was tied up in the back yard with a length of rope. The man came to get him; knocked on the door; went around the back and asked the lady why he was tied up at the same time as untying him. Dog bit his left arm. The lady said: that's why he's tied up. But the man took him anyway. The hammer got back to work on the left eye socket. I can't go blaming the dog so let's get this piece over with and move on. Okay. Okay; stay cool. Let me lie down so you can get my eye again. Skip it! I reply. Don't knock it. It's all-right! The food is okay once in a while. Anyway. Fuck the profanity. No. Fuck the profundity. That's right. Let's get back to the killing! Do you want some sexual enhancement? She looks at me with a lop-sided left-sided grin probably caused by some mashed trigeminal nerve or other. I consider it. Nope! Hammer makes a punch-drunk nose splash in all directions.



I knew this couple once. Lived opposite me in a really nice little courtyard of small apartments. When I say 'knew' what I mean is I saw him come and go occasionally and her through the kitchen window. Anyway. After a few months I come in during midday; really hot. The woman's sat in the doorway to her apartment wearing just a bikini. I get turned on, but what really strikes me is that in all the months I'd been there I never really saw them at all. And one day here's this woman in a bikini and I realise she's got a plump but good figure. So I derive a conclusion. I derived a conclusion and came up with agoraphobia: she's agoraphobic, stays in the house all day, smokes often and only exists from time to time. Well. Later the same day a miracle happens. I'm sat outside my house, taking the late-sun, when a car pulls up. Out hops the guy. A couple seconds later out hops the woman; looking good in a printed cotton sarong, same bikini top and a pair of shades on her forehead. She's smiling. She's happy. She's been out for the afternoon: she's not agoraphobic. Just shows how wrong you can be. Her heart stops, at last, and now I can get to grieving. Up above, a pair of buzzards circle on the air high over the clearing and they cry out to the world. It's the most amazing thing.

## VII

People get killed. Are hollow. They come up to me like clear outlines with no insides, no complexity. When they die they fade. Slowly. If I look back and watch, I see them disappear before my eyes. They leave a material token of themselves; I can pick it up and use it. I see the body isn't there. Bodies are intersections of time and space where time and space does its thing. The body has no say in it. However, every now and then we remember that we have to die. Our bodies do tell us this much at least. Some people think they pull the strings but the whole thing beyond the body holds sway. Smack face punch face bite face cry.

Now: I want you to get back to real for a while, the man says. How are you going to do it? I'll open a small shop and talk about the things I sell and the people who come in. What sort of shop is it? Hardware store. It's always a hardware store. I've come across loads. They're traditional and always figure in such and such a story. They're solid, robust. Traditional. Yeh, and what hides behind the people behind the counter? Behind that pile of pans and nails. People dying? That's right! People dying, yeh, like everywhere else. So what? What's the big surprise? Nothing I guess. But when you read

about such and such a place they try hard to convey a sense of timelessness, you know, security; a safe reference point. Yeh like I said: no surprise there. What about your customers? Well, this old lady comes in once a week; every Thursday afternoon around one. She smells of lavender like old-ladies do. Some old ladies. Carries a woven basket with a diamond design around the top. She doesn't shuffle or nothing; she's together like in body and mind. She wears a pale green cardigan of fine wool; very expensive I'd say. She wears a flecked wool skirt. She doesn't smell at all. He stops for a second, thinking; staring into the distance. Then he starts again: No. She's not old. Not that old; she's around fifty with dark hair tied up in a scarf. Is she attractive, I ask. Ummm, yes, I think so. I think you'd think so. And she's nice, you know: a nice person. Always opens up with 'good afternoon mister such and such.' How are you? And I say: Fine! Thanks for asking. What can I help you with today? And she'll look at the counter, rummage in her bag and pull out a list. I need some pegs. Some clothes pegs, you know. No problem; wooden or plastic? We have both. She'll have the wooden ones, I guess. Yes she does. She never buys much, never spends a lot of money. Just house stuff like cleaners, wax and things. Does she stop and talk when she's done her buying? Sometimes she does. Sometimes she has a boy with her. Very

imaginative, I smile; she must be a mother. The boy's around thirteen. Short dark hair same colour as the woman's. It's not shaved. Sort of grown-out shaved; like it needs shaving again. And he's got a good face. Sharp features, not good looking or ugly but interesting. Odd thing about the boy is his clothes are a little old-fashioned; even compared to the woman's. His trousers are knee-length with long socks pulled way up underneath. And he's really quiet; never speaks. But he's not afraid to make eye contact; friendly eye-contact but always behind the eyes he's weighing it up. The cogs are turning. Tries to get a handle on everything; everything in the shop and what the woman said and what I say.

Do you like him? Yeh. I guess so! I never thought about it. He's okay. He'll be somebody someday. You'll have an important conversation with him one day, in a few years. He's marked for something special. When was the last time you spoke to her? It's hard to tell, he says after a while. Time's dragged lately; got a bit blurred. Business is slack. I may take a vacation. Sounds good, I say; trying to sound enthusiastic, cheery. I have to take a trip: want to come along?

## VIII

I stab the cherry tomato with my fork; trying hard not let it shoot off the plate or squirt seeds at me. Each of the three tomatoes I've eaten so far taste of the smell of a mouldy fridge. I worry I'm being poisoned. Numerous times in history whole, populations have been laid-low by a witches curse or evil spirits. Only later the spirits turn out to be some crazy fungus that makes your ears go black and fall off and your skin burn to the point of madness; the point at which you scrape it all off with a sharp stone. Imagine what that looks like! Imagine seeing your own family do that. I don't have to imagine what peeled-people look like.

What's the worst thing you can think of? Being peeled is on a few peoples lists. Imagine being peeled in your own bed in the middle of the night. You're fast asleep. Off in some dream; already awake in the morning and having breakfast. Somebody hits you on the head with the ashtray off the window sill. When you come-to, your partner's already dead beside you and the ceiling-light illuminates your face centre stage. Your eyes sting and your face feels wet. The beauty of the night. Most of you are asleep, but the rest of us hang around outside your back door; slowly turning the handle to see if it gives.

Trying the window so quietly. Moving around the house, patiently looking for the entrance. Methodically. Silently. Systematically. You haven't the faintest idea we're out here. You sit watching TV. Not really in any kind of feeling-state; just ticking over on reduced power. But on the other side of that wall we're running across the wide field that runs away from your rear window. Getting closer and closer and bigger and bigger and then bursting through the wall with our teeth to rip out your throat. One day you will be awoken in the night by some strange sound, but by the time you get your act together the skin's already peeling away.

The cherry tomato poses a challenge: do I ignore the taste and go for the goodness or do I get black ears and toes? I've eaten three and this is the fourth. I like tomatoes. Eating tomato is a good thing to do. I look at the fourth tomato impaled on the fork. I eat it, but that's the last one. I finish the rest of the meal; tuna, salad greens, piece of cheese but two more cherry tomatoes remain. I position them on the plate like two bloody eyeballs and lay the fork between them. What's everyone else up to? What's that guy in the wheelchair doing? Last time I saw him wheeling along in his power-lifter gloves he had a black bag on his lap. A briefcase. No; a case like a doctor's bag, but not a doctor's bag. Smaller; a trendy brief case. What was in the

case and what's it doing right now? The red wheelchair passed me by with a whoosh. Guy glared up at me as he passed and I was the one who had to get out of his way. I remember stepping to one side in plenty of time; I watched him come along the path like a he was on a mission. Perhaps he was. A secret agent deep under cover; chopped off his legs for authenticity. The bag was part of it. But what if his mission just stopped as soon as I turned my back? What if he just stopped existing? Became part of the white nothingness just beyond the range of my senses. Where are the people? Are they white-nothing or do they sit in their homes waiting to sense me; to come to life?

I can hear men calling out somewhere. Can't tell if they're fighting or kidding each other. Could go either way. The guy in the wheelchair wheels round to turn the TV on. Black-bag sits by the TV. One eye on the bag, one on the TV. The shouting has shifted down the street some distance. Bottles smashing on the road. I can't see what's going on. I'm sat on my own in this restaurant booth. Sat on a c-shaped blue velour bench seat around a round table. I can see straight into the booth opposite but all round the periphery is the whiteness. And yet those voices and bottles? Sat in the booth opposite is just one man. He's eating tuna salad. I put my hand down under the table and touch the black

bag. The man in the booth opposite has a black-bag under his table. He looks up at me, and then touches his black-bag. Okay. I know. We need the wheelchair guy. We need his black bag. We sit patiently. He finishes his salad. Reaches into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulls out a photo. Every now and then he looks up from the photo to stare off into the distance. It's a hot day. The guy slips off his jacket and lays it beside him. He loosens the black and white diagonal stripe tie and jerks his neck once to each side. I saw a guy in a movie do that once. Waitress. Waitress, he calls. There's the merest hint of irritation in his voice. The waitress comes over and stands with her back to me. I can see stretch marks on her fat back as the white blouse strains upwards. He says something to her I can't hear or see and she nods; goes off to the kitchen. He'll be here in a while; he calls across to me and I nod without saying anything. Then he asks me where we're gonna put the three bags together, and I tell him right here. He doesn't question this at all or show any sign of disagreement. So I take it that here is ok. He glances up as the waitress comes back from the kitchen with a pot of coffee in her hand and a couple of ring donuts.

She fills up his cup with black coffee, puts the pot on the table and a ring donut on a napkin. Then she picks up the pot and comes over to



me and smiles; fills my cup and puts the other ring donut on my table on a napkin. I put sugar in my coffee. Only my ring donut is pink iced and his is white iced. Thank you. We eat the donuts and drink the coffee. The man's looking across at me, having put down his cup and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. He didn't mean what he said, he says. The guy in the wheelchair. He didn't mean it, he says to me, and then waits for a reply. Oh. He just gets cheese on his screen every now and then. Makes him angry and he goes spinning off in that chair, tries to run people down. Well. I think he should be more considerate. Needs to look at it from the other persons viewpoint; somebody's gonna let his tires down. He grins at me. Now come on! You know that's impossible. There is only his viewpoint. No, I don't see it that way. When we put the bags together you'll see then! The guy snorts down his nose; flares his nostrils at me. His eyes flash amber for a second, indicating what's inside him, but he says nothing more. Amber eyes for the Here, red eyes for the Animals, and white eyes for the Gone. White-eyes gather unnoticed, until massive and critical and become a shadow dense. My eyes are not white. I call out to the man: my eyes are not white! I think he understands. The disinterested stony unemotion of his face verifies my thought.

Okay. Here's the man in the wheelchair. He's wheeling up the sidewalk across the way. He's whipping across the street. He butts the door and stops inside. The bag on his lap. This table down here, he calls to us, and nods to a booth equidistant between the three of us. Whoever puts his bag down last gets to take all three away and lay them side by side and open them up. We all start for the booth at the same time. The wheelchair guy was always first. The guy opposite me is up all fair and square and so am I. None of us linger; fate has to play its hand. We already know who takes the black bags so there's no point in pre-empting it. It's a beautiful morning. Getting hot and very blue. The city's wide awake to the smells and sounds of the day. The people going about the town like they have a purpose. We three came here like some natural catastrophe. But the people are lucky 'cos we're holding it back for now. But when the black bags go down and the wheels set in motion, things change. The three lack bags lay on the table side by side by side. A telephone rings in the back of the restaurant.

## XII

I awake with a start, and then slip back to this time. It has no end Rescue Me says. And I answer that it needs no end because we pass, as the dream passes, to start again. But we all want a resolution, don't we? And we all get some kind of resolution, if not what we imagined or, rather, wished for. Death is not the resolution, just what is happened. We arrive at that moment and then diffuse out, dissipate, reorganise. Resolution is stretched all over time and in all its directions and permutations.

Rescue Me brings out my most unrestrained side; makes me go all distant. I enjoy our discussions. Rescue Me and me: we go back a long way. We've known each other for years. As kids we went to the same school and kicked the same ground; got kicked around and passed it on. Nothing excessive. Nothing that's gonna make a kid grow up unusual. Not that I noticed anyway. Maybe living either side of a Shit Weekend Dad had something to do with it, albeit a tiny part. This type of Dad, perhaps a common type, got the kids maybe two weekends a month. An embittered ex would drop off what was usually a small boy and a slightly larger girl, around five in the afternoon, on a Friday. Some mild shouting would follow, some

banging around and then loud music through until one in the morning. Saturday morning, around ten, there would be a loud banging on the door and a woman would shout out for someone to open the door. This would usually involve one of the small children putting aside its toy truck, junior beautician set or other cultural artefact and struggling with the door. Some talking would ensue followed by riotous giggling, kids squealing probably from getting their ribs tickled, the Dad articulating in a modulated and calm voice, the woman saying things like 'oh! Be careful now! Oh! That's funny ha ha ha etc etc'. Then: a long period of silence broken by the occasional sound of the children munching on a bag of sweets, maybe the rustling of plastic wrapping. No adult voices to be heard for maybe twenty minutes. Fucked up people up and down the country were approximating the elements of this attempt at a family life, which did indeed exist here and there. Still. Nothing here to do with abuse. Nothing that culture wouldn't tolerate, if not advocate, in the twist-up misunderstanding of what it was all about. No. Just pervasive, insidious disregard and ignorance. Common or garden. That was what we could hear, between us and at weekends, me and Rescue Me. Maybe it pissed him off for some reason. Maybe Rescue Me was already unusual. The first day we came across each other was the first

day of high school. From that day on. We parted company every now and then; got it back together. Nothing unusual. Nothing else to say really; it was a long time ago. But I do recall a book incident. Me and Rescue Me had been to the library to kill some time. The library sold off its old stock on a regular basis; we'd root around for something meaningful and cool for the price of a drink. I found a sci-fi book in pristine condition. The cover drew me in immediately: you picked it up because you thought it was completely black and an all-black cover always draws you in. But once you pulled this book off the shelf the black gives way to a blue splash on the front. In this ice blue splash stands a lone-figure: muscled arms torn. Cropped hair. Could be human on the surface but like no human you'd meet in this life; this is the post-human personified. Maybe cyborg. Maybe a figure recurred out of the dream you dreamt last night. It was good art imitating fear: something to admire and something to run away from. Then you realised you were looking through a big hole knocked in this black wall and the post-human stood there on the other side and you know that he killed you by the end. You just know it. So the book has you by the shorts before you read page one.

Me and Rescue Me both stood looking at this book in the library. And we both knew that we were in it. And it was gonna effect a slight

shift in our trajectories. You get a strange feeling when you come across a book like this. I don't like to open it up. Don't want to be let down and knowing that I won't, but deferring that salty hit, so to speak. Me and Rescue Me took the book back to the house. The thing with a lot of these ex-library stock books is the plastic cover they come in; protective. I hate them. Takes the book a million miles from my fingers and if I can't feel the book I can't meet it half way. So there in front of Rescue Me I try and pull off the plastic cover; not a dust jacket; a sign from the Man that the Man is more real than you; makes you go foetal. Curled up into a small ball knees drawn up just like a helpless little pup. Yeh we're all helpless you dumb fucks. Fuck you for fucking being here. Me and Rescue Me looking at the book and I try and pull this crime plastic cover off the thing. And I tear it. I try and ease the cover off and the front tears inside the plastic. And right there it's like the music just appears round me: quiet, melancholy. Reminds me of the horror I never lived through but somehow we all got born with. Human horror. Human despondency. Inbuilt nihilism. Just a design flaw, that's all. Every down-beat moment every human individual ever faced, somehow reprised in the most insignificant of things. Rescue Me just stares at the cover a-while. He simply feels what I feel and I can

understand that. But I guess that Rescue Me got the active and I got the passive because he leaps up on me, knocks me to the ground with his hands round my throat. I can't blame Rescue Me: I do the same in a different version of this very story. Rescue Me squeezes my throat so tight I think the blood turned to dust in my neck. I dried out there and then. And I passed out too, so the nurse said. But Rescue Me had me down as his second murder victim. And still a teenager. Rescue Me had a Dad and a Mum. They all lived together in a small wooden house. He had a strange sister who hung around with girls maybe six years younger than herself. She never spoke much but talked a lot with the family cat. Once she had a conversation with a coffee machine waiting for the bus. I think she was asking it which type of drink to buy. The coffee machine tried to ignore her but she was insistent. It advised her to go for the hot chocolate as the hot-chocolate was the most authentic tasting drink on offer. Everything else tasted like it came from a government experimental lab. She took the advice but didn't like the taste. Picked an argument with the coffee machine, which pissed scalding water over her left leg. The coffee machine got carted off to a mental asylum where everybody knew the machine was part of the plot and they gave it a wide

birth; bought hot-chocolate no questions asked.

Rescue Me's sister was run over by a red estate car and killed. As she died she said something to Rescue Me, who was knelt by her side trying to stop the blood coming out of her ear. For a moment, something drew close and nearly intervened and Rescue Me's sister nearly made it. But the pieces were slow in rearranging themselves. Or: she can't have wanted it badly enough and something went back into the detail. I thought about stepping in and changing the outcome, but at that time tended to leave things to themselves. I stood on the pavement watching Rescue Me trying to gather up the valuable blood and wring it from a handkerchief back into her ear. That was the worst thing that ever happened to Rescue Me. The Mum and Dad drew inwards after that. They stayed together, but for a long time Rescue Me couldn't touch them. It's better now. But they still don't know about Rescue Me's first murder. Slightly built, maybe underfed kid. Shocking hair shocking temper. Shocked an old lady stood unsteady on a small table.

Rescue Me helped the old lady every weekend and got rewarded with sweets and pop. Which was fine until Rescue Me started the book collection. Which became an obsession underfunded by pocket money. And sweets



and pop. So one Saturday, Rescue Me explains to the old lady quite polite that this book collection is taking shape and would it be possible to ditch the sweets and start earning some cash. The old lady declines Rescue Me's offer and then makes the fatal mistake of expecting the disaffected Rescue Me to turn off the electric whilst she unscrews this blown light-bulb. She gets the bulb out; notices the holder-electrodes are green-black and corroded and asks Rescue Me to fetch the small screwdriver and begins to scratch away at them. Rescue Me got the screwdriver and put the mains fuse back in its socket in the electricity cupboard over the kitchen sink. The old lady didn't die of shock but snapped her neck as she hit the floorboards. Rescue Me said that as the fuse slid back into its socket he got a vision of the old lady on the deck with her head at a crazy angle. After that Rescue Me shared the power and I got where I am today.

Down through one town we pass, along the wide main-street, with the white buildings on either side peeling into dust. Windows of filth hiding lifeless people. Filthy doors open to let the apathy out into the daylight. And from there it slowly spreads to the next town and then the world. Rescue Me says that these people in these towns work themselves to death scraping poor quality produce off the land. They're simple farmers with simple

brains, all believing in the reality of the cow stuck up to its shitty neck in the shitty bog; believing that Dear John exists. I feel an urge to experience the town at closer range and suggest we stop. We stop outside a row of buildings; five shop fronts about to disappear under the invisible shower of grey threads from space. The threads come down and slowly fade out anything that moves too slowly: old people fading from the spirit outwards, whole towns fading down into the earth. Entire species leaving vacant lots on the face of the planet. One day the grey threads will come down so dense we'll be only a smudge mark in front of a dying sun. Rescue Me wants a coffee. I want a soda. We see the sign that says 'Restaurant' and Rescue Me pushes back the wide glass door and in we go. This isn't my natural line of work. I kind of just fell in to it.

## VIII

There's a spider crawling on the counter. Scratch its way over my hand if I stay still, but if the fucker tries, it's squashed with the ash-tray before it can say black dripping blood. Sometimes I reckon the whole place sounds like it's crawling with a million spiders and if these two open the door before the spider gets to my hand it's gonna rain all Monday yeh that's right: all day Monday. Look around for the best spot; well they're all the same and as soon as you notice that I'll pretend to notice you. By the window? How original! Why not huddle up in the back and give me something to think about? So Monday's dry. That's a bonus! There's a whole world outside. I know it. I read about it. Why are you here? What are you doing? Get the Hell away! Get out in the world and get the Hell away from that window! Perhaps you can give me a ride to the city and then things will be on the up. I heard you the first time. Have a look at these menus and then tell me what you want; I don't need a pad because I don't write and can hear every word you say and the eggs taste like shit yeh and the coffee tastes like shit too. I want to see that place with the big tower want to go do the bull-run in what's that place? And with luck I'll meet a girl and that'll be that. But

that won't happen because I'm stuck here in the grey in fuckin' nowhere in mental and physical decline in shit up to my neck. But that don't stop me thinking that one day I'll pay this place my last respects and get the fuck out of here. Have what the fuck you like! It's all the same shit.

Rescue Me sits by the window; back to the door: Rescue Me's chilled. I sit facing Rescue Me and facing the door, with my left side to the counter and the right to the window. The table's round; wood effect plastic-coated melamine, dirty, dried up coffee spills, sugar. The guy behind the counter forces a smile at us; big false smile, big jaw with a good covering of fat to boot. Get a shave, fucker. Rescue Me looks up from the dog-eared menu and says: 'coffee.' The guy comes over, barely able to hide the fact that he'd kill for a little excitement. Eyes roll up looking for a sign that never comes. Well. I am the sign. In fact, today I am the sign and your luck is gonna change. But first get me a coke, a coffee and something in a wrapper. If the kitchen's as dirty as you, I'll get sick and probably fucking die. What's that? You can't imagine! You cannot begin to imagine? You cannot get close to knowing what it's like when somebody close to you, the closest person to you, leaves. Leaves the story, changes the story forever. Maybe you can? Yeh. We all can. Nonetheless: the one turns their back on you

for whatever reason and you turn back on yourself. The best you can do is to try waking up as normal but then noticing you're stuck half-way out your body. Nothing fits! Nothing fits and you don't make sense anymore.

So this is what I'm going to do: when me and Rescue Me have finished our drinks and whatever other shit you bring us I'm gonna come up to the counter and pay and then walk back round the counter and go in the kitchen, through that swing door and I'm gonna hold a gun at your wife's head and take her away from you forever. Is that okay? The fucker nods. Then you'll understand. It's a hard life. Different. Comes a point where you forget if you were born different or one day felt different and adopted that feeling. Gets to a point where you start going in circles trying to work out which it was. I get the phone out my jean pocket and flick through the menu. Sounds, settings, calls, phonebook. Settings, calls, phonebook, sounds. Round and round and round just watching the words. Faster and faster. Sounds, settings, calls, phonebook. Sounds, settings, calls, phonebook. The phone doesn't ring. Everybody's unique. Outside, the occasional car struggles to find the road.

As soon as a car enters a town like this it gets covered in a layer of grey that finds its way through the air vents and into the drivers' lungs. The grey forms itself into a special

kind of amnesia that affects the soul and the spirit: the spirit comes from elsewhere to animate the soul and the soul binds the body to the earth and its kin and blah blah blah. So after years of the grey-amnesia you can see the soul forgetting its job, and when the body finally forgets it's a body the spirit is obliged to go back elsewhere. But it goes weakened by the grey it carries and that spreads through the entire universe. Grey-amnesia is recycled. The people are all having their souls fail. I worked it out years ago but felt no better. The cars occasionally pull up and a man or a woman climbs slowly out; goes into a shop and stays there. An old man shuffles along the road mumbling to himself.

This is a dirty place, Rescue Me says. I agree; casting my eyes around for signs of newness or a patch that the dirt missed, but I don't find any. If it isn't under dirt it's under grey. Even the dirt is under grey under dirt. I drink lukewarm coffee. Oily patches film the surface and the colour's indeterminate; no word for it. Then the vans appear outside on the road. First, the white one that says 'Reality' on the side. And then the lurid-pink van. Pair of scarlet lips on the radiator grill. Where was I? Was I going to kill that guy's wife or something? I was! Okay. Watch this, I say to Rescue Me, and if necessary: step in and rescue me; that guy may have a knife up

his back. The Fucker is just coming back out the kitchen and I ease up very very self-aware out the seat. Smoothly. So smoothly but the damn thing catches on my heel and tips itself up with a clatter. Fat Café looks over at me and susses it out. Let's try it again: I ease up very very self-aware out the seat. Smoothly. But the damn thing catches on my heel and tips itself up. Clatter. The Fucker looks over. Try again and I ease up very very self-aware out the seat. Smoothly and the damn thing clatters over off my heel. Fucker looks up and I start shooting the fucking chair. Now try that again you plastic shit. Meanwhile, the other Fucker makes for the fire exit. It just doesn't make any sense! Let me tell you something, I say. Just stop a moment. Listen to this: It feels like I've been going around in circles for years. I've been aiming for the drop off point for an aeon and every time I get close I spin off round into another loop. I come back round again. I come close.

Now the Fucker is frozen solid and wondering what comes next. Maybe I'm in a diminishing circle, such that one day I can touch down and shut off the engine. But that isn't happening. Some retro engines fire up at the zenith point and throw me back into the wider orbit. I come around again. I angle it down. I aim it on the centre. And so on and so on. Are you following me? Fucker nods. This

in itself reveals a truth just beyond my reach. I know it and it's a shared truth. You catch a glimpse of it in the eye of the man you passed on the road. The child buying those sweets. It has nothing to do with death. It's about the hidden order in all this chaos and we really don't have to worry. Back many years ago, in the conjectured Golden Age of Simplicity, scholars liked to imagine a closer truth that may have been there. It may not. But the premise in itself holds sway. Did they cry in the same way? When it was over for them, was it over the same way as we understand it today? A big question mark on that one. My bottle is nearly empty. There's not much time to solve the mystery. That's how I feel. And I have to get me to a place where I can at least buy to an illusion of the mystery solved. Do you follow? The Fucker blinks, and nods, so I continue.

There are etchings that draw us back to other events. They open up holes that are a mainline to times and places. There is a beauty in filling the mainline with a cheap chemical and a perverse idea. It's a defiance of values. A refusal of meaning. No. An overflow of meaning. Etchings persist until something else erodes their features down to a smooth coin surface shiny at the core. Darker at the rim. I count rhythmically in seconds as close as I can manage. I wait until the effect arrives in full; I wait until the



twirling streaming pink chiffon dancer hits the point of reflexion. Pauses, captures ecstasy for a moment and builds momentum pink streaming chiffon trail changes hue feet placed firmly. A moment of perfection. A split of infinity and time. There is another parallel dimension there. Academics try to explain the ineluctable. The fucked-up moments. But they don't and they won't because the moments are just that; transient, fleeting, resist definition. But they still try. They say: we write; we can't talk about this. We can't write about it. But we are going to keep on trying to pin down this thing, capture this creature which defies form and reality and if we can't capture it then we will allude to it. We will loop round in a diminishing circle pointing and gesticulating toward that thing which can't be said. And when we get spun back out we will choose and use other words to dig new tunnels that undermine the thing. But when we surface and the tunnel is complete, what we find: the thing is sat waiting and staring at us. It jumps up. It laughs. It points at us a long, grey finger. It diffuses itself and twists away. It calls as it surrounds us, calling us to frantically spin looking in all directions: where was I? Where was I, I ask the Fucked-Up Café Owner? He repeats what I had just told him, word for word. Ah! Okay. Well. We know this: it's not death. That's a plot device. Just a

distraction. A device that makes us look the other way right at that moment when we should be staring squarely..... at..... I can't finish the sentence and he wants to know. I tell him be patient. There's no systematic squinting system in place. Is there? He nods, but I know he doesn't really believe it. Or doesn't understand it. We learn to read out of the eyes of the traumatised what trauma is. And people very rarely [even the ones with some augmented insight] rip off the cover sheet. To see what the next sheet says: it says: page number..... where it begins. This is where it begins, for you, I tell him. He nods one last time. Then I shoot him in the knee. All he does is draw his breath in sharply and then tell me he saw that coming. He sits down on the floor. I watch that pile of barely-stable-waiting-to-burst-all-over-blubber-and-bone-amalgam disorganise itself, get in keeping with some entropic principle, re-organise itself, defy a universal maxim, compose across several different planes and then, keeping its left leg straight, struggle with a dirty bandana in its back pocket that it wants to pull out and tie around its knee to stop the blood. But it's stuck under its fat ass. Let me get that for you. When you've tied off your leg, we're gonna drag out to the car and put you in the trunk. Try and appreciate what we are doing here for you. You're gonna be better off in the

long run. We're gonna leave you in a ditch. The blood leaves a trail across the café floor, out the back door, across the dust of the back lot. It attenuates to a hair's breadth before leaving just an intermittent trace by the time we get him to the car. I move the black bag over to one side and we haul him in bulging gut first. Slam the lid. This is a journey you're going on. A proper journey. He nods under the closed trunk lid, but I don't see it.

## X

I spent two weeks in hospital. I can remember getting there. I was in a garage near a hotel buying some chocolate. Listening to the birds singing on a warm dusty evening. The kids outside, particularly black kids, must have taken offence at something I said. First one I broke his nose, second one I broke his nose and the fingers on his right hand. Then they must have broken my nose and fingers. And now the doctor says I must be suffering from amnesia. A particular type of amnesia. So I can remember up to but not after. And the doctor tells me it may stay that way and that was three months ago. My memories started up yesterday. Got two and a half months unaccounted for. That's a long time for nothing to happen; it needed filling in. So I filled it in as a roady for some or another band.

A small-time small-town guitar combo wanting to be like they just started the whole thing off. Staring out the window of the tour bus listening to up-tempo piano pop. Coming over the radio. Sometimes I drove and sometimes I stared out the window in the side of the bus. Heat haze shimmering off the far desert. Sometimes I drank with the band; still on the road. When I drank tequila, enough tequila, the roadrunners would

appear alongside the bus and race and make me laugh. When I drank gin I relaxed. When I drank wine I brooded. And the band were serious. They thought they were good and one day they'd be famous. So they drank and tried to get deep into the authentic thing. Down in their hearts they weren't in it. Secretly they just loved music and each of 'em in their own way wanted to be the top of their particular pile. They performed the characters associated with the music; culturally, affectively, stylised it just so. And that kind of got in the way of the group thing. They wanted to be famous, but good and famous; not just famous for the sake of being famous. The drummer loved his drums. He loved talking about the best cymbals to buy. He was working up from a good cymbal to the best cymbal: hand made by some old guy in a shed. One offs. The cymbal always highly polished and he really did care about it like it had some innate magic he could unleash. And he really could play. Every time he hit the cymbal he grew and looked a little different. But the drummer had a fuzzy kind of soul. Benign but fuzzy. So he was in on his drums and knew where he wanted to get and he knew he was part of a band and thought he wanted to make it in that quarter, but deep deep down he couldn't fit the role. He had that split that people sometimes have. Whatever motivated him had turned into

some rational end and that rational end had been set in some context. But with the drummer the rational end and the context were disconnected. And so it was with all of them. They should have all added up to more than the sum of the parts, but they didn't; they added up to less. Each of them on their own, as just one part. But not together. And the drummer smoked too much weed. Not because he was stylising in accord with the music; nothing to do with his role. He smoked it 'cos he genuinely [liked] the cheap chemicals in his head'. And I was the roady. I humped the amps out of the bus and into the bars. I ran out the speaker cables and the mic cables in a neat line when possible. I taped them down. I put up the stands and there would appear a space which the band just had to step into. But the drummer always set up his kit because setting up the kit was mental preparation that the guitar and the bass could do without. They didn't even tune their guitars. I'd do that. I'd sit on the amp and plug the guitar into a small grey tuner with a needle on it that moved to and fro. I'd always detune the string and work it up in pitch with the head. I liked to play a chord or two to see if it all fitted and then just to make sure I'd try just one string one more time to see if it was still in. And it generally was with the guitars being good and expensive. Out in the desert, where

everything was as hot as hell all the time the strings had nowhere to stretch to; so they stayed in. The bus would pull up at the gig. The band would spill out; always excited; not yet bored with the monotony of long desert journeys, the anticipation of the night's performance got them through. I was kind of the manager and roady in one; so I'd go in and find the owner or waitress or whoever I could find, get taken to the stage area, do a mental calculation about layouts and whether we were gonna fit, and then go and give the band the ok. It was a kind of ritual. The way it was done. The bus pulled up. I do the meeting. Get the kit and start about setting it up. The band would wander round taking it all in and every time they never at all seemed concerned about coming across all cool to the few drinkers hung around the bar; turning their heads with a just a dulled interest in the new faces wandering about. When the kit was set up I'd get the band together; round 'em up for a sound check. Watch them strap on the guitars; adjust the amps just a little and jockey themselves into position. They played to a set list that didn't need changing and'd just crank straight into the first number.

I always set the mix desk up to the front and right if I could. Ideally I needed to be slap bang in the middle of the room but that wasn't gonna happen. The mixer sat on a

small table with me on a small metal fold out chair; seat the size of a saucer and covered in imitation zebra hide. I didn't need to check the instruments one by one unless the drums needed mike-ing up extra, and I only did that when the mood took me. I preferred to check the band as a whole; listen to the whole thing; balance it all out as one. I'd watch. Waiting for the thrill to take over; the point at which they began to spill out of themselves and merge into something unseen in the spaces between their physical bodies. But they never did. You could stop and focus on any one instrument and it'd make you smile. Even the dullest of drunks could appreciate the riffs and licks shot off a smooth bullet, but you couldn't step back and hear it all merge and get fused with the people stood next to you. You ask somebody after the gig what they heard and they always said the same thing: he was good or that guy can play. But you never got anything about the band as a band. That's why they'd never get there.

One particular afternoon in one particular desert town: the bus rolls in dragging the desert behind it. It's all kind of orange soft looking; the rocks weathering up some aluminium mineral; out in the heat. The bus smokes diesel; mixing it with the dust cloud like it's gonna take shape and grant some wishes; or turn us to stone pillars like those out there. So this bus rolls up onto Main



Street looking for The Club; a popular venue music. And other things. The desert folk come a hundred miles of an evening to watch a rock band tear up the stage. A country band. Any band. It's on Main Street; the only street in this strung out place so we can't miss it. The white buildings of Main Street peep through the orange dust that's all about. People go about the day; in and out of the shops to pick up their brown-paper bags of groceries or maybe some new material to replace the curtains washed just once too often. Large cars and pick-ups pull in and out of the diagonal spaces lining the street. And half way down is The Club. I swing the bus right up outside no problem. Main Street. Some desert town. I look back to the band; half asleep. Smoking. Eating a slice of last night. The drummer raises his eyebrows; meaning: here we are again, but it's ok for now. I don't mind it. This is excitement.

The door whooshes open. I climb out the seat and jump down onto Main Street. A bill on the black double door proclaims the band plays tonight: Good music. A killing good time. The foyer smells of stale beer stale cigarette and I call out for some attention. Oddly enough it's not unpleasant but familiar and friendly. Meanwhile: The Real Deal is just down the street, on the edges of town. The Real Deal was just around the corner. On the edges of this town and every

other town. The Real Deal was a life of cheap food and ragged trousers with no laces in some brown boots. The Real Deal played a cheap and badly tuned electro guitar or soft-wood acoustic cigar box three string that wouldn't stay in. Hot or cold. This wasn't some contrivance. No simulation of a simulation here.

The Real Deal walked with a limp. He used a stick and his shapeless booze breast sagged down to his sagging belly. He didn't shave. He smoked all day and his cigar box always sounded slightly out of shape. Discordant. Not in that 'it all comes together' when we play pre-planned discordant. Disturbed. Dissonant with himself and everything else. Lyrics that didn't even try and conceal the rape, the murder, the aimless desire. What he had on mind. Rippling through this vibe and connecting it to the environment and the people was the violence of the thing. And the honest indifference of one person to the next. If the vibe barely hung together in the wood-shack juke joints it was a true reflection of a people that didn't hang together either. An uneasy sense that at any point the music could flip into a mess of noise and the tune would be gone. Replaced by a black scribbled space. An uneasy sense that, at any point, the people could flip into a mess of noise and be replaced by a black malevolent scribbled space that stared past you and then came

back around and settled on your left-hand side. You were now the object of an attention that wished you harm simply because that was the nature of the thing. Nothing personal. These men wouldn't make it past fifty-five. Their wives seldom made it past twenty. They told their wives to fix their supper. Told their wives to take off their clothes. They laid out drunk on white lightning. When they stumbled back into the thing, the Real Deal would punch their wives to death, just so they could lay back down again.

## XI

March the seventeenth. Thinking about the body guard: got shot. It was ten years ago in a sunny place in the desert; working as the muscle for a bike magazine. He used to come into the office and talk bikes with the staff. Real nice guy; size of a truck. Always wore a denim cut off and a beard. Long red beard. No tattoos. He reckoned tattoos just wouldn't suit him. There'd never been anyone in his family he could recollect with tattoos. He got shot with a small calibre gun that made just a slight popping sound. You would hardly register it. Rodman sat back against the wall and began to die. Blood trickled out between his fingers, down his left side, started to pool around his left hand as he sat looking across the street at a blue motorcycle: a hard-tail with ape-hangers. Thinking about Dad. Where was mum? Who shot me? Same guy who played Joanie's pocket? Joanie in her blue suede shorts and red-checked shirt; tied up above her bare midriff. Pushed her back on the green baize; sunlight picking up the dusty air. Never knew if it was a set up or just happened that way. Six men. Five of them watching. Waiting for a turn. Six pockets and Joanie and the green baize. Down the road an old man dusts his path. Down the road some

more, a man looks across to the rails and sees the train coming down out the pass. Driver on the train talks to his mate and points across to the edge of the small town they start through. Joanie turns her head and watches the train through the window. Bites her bottom lip to keep from shrieking. The man pushes into her again. The keys to a blue chopper drop from his hand on to the floor. Rodman died.

## XII

**Y**ou must listen intently to the sound in your ears. It's a carrier signal. The message is layered into it. You have to separate the two. Turn the message into the signal. The message tells you. Follow what the message says. It's easiest to separate the message when you are lying-down. Go and lie down.

## XII

Every now and then the old man would rock back on his heels. Every now and then. Every now and then he'd look across at me, nodding very slightly; listening to what I was saying? So tell me. How did that feel? He'd ask. But mostly he just listened. At the start of each meeting I'd go through the black iron gate and on the other side he'd be stood outside the cabin; waiting for me with a paid-for smile. We'd go into the cabin and I'd sit under the shelf of books, never able to see what they were about. Books about what to do with people, I supposed. I always looked around for a while before finally smiling at him. And he would smile at me and say nothing. So neither would I. We just smiled at each other. But no matter what I said about it all in my head, that this time I wasn't gonna crack, that he was gonna crack, he never did. That was his job.

Odd isn't it. An odd job where you sit there smiling at someone until they talk. I always started first by saying something like I didn't know where to start. But that was the start. Always. And then what ever came next came from some place I forgot. Stop trying to control this situation that's uncontrollable. What I need is what we all need and so on and so forth and over and over the same

pattern of ideas, of images going around. Same images from before? Maybe. Some were. Liked the idea of the trail? Yes I did. Give me something new I can work with. Something for now.

Okay. Try this: history has a way of repeating itself, so the saying goes. What does that mean? History has a way of repeating itself, I said. Well I don't want to go all analytical on you. That's not going to get us where we need to be. He perks up a little. Smiles at me like he knows and murmurs for me to carry on. I'm trying to avoid all use of the common resources. I don't want to seem clichéd or any such thing. I don't want any reference points beyond the fact that it's all referenced off itself. That way you got to make it all up yourself and work extra hard. His face straightens. Why? What makes you think that it requires extra work? That's arrogant of you. What makes you assume anyone will bother? Well let me make up a story. I stop to give the story time to come up. The tree just outside the cabin window struggles in the wind. I can't remember much about the story because all that wants to come up are the wrong memories. So I have to make something up. Perhaps he won't notice.

It starts with a picture. I can see it. I can feel it in my breast pocket. There was this boy once upon a time. Who lived in a small village with his mother? His father and his sister.



The village stopped short of the foothills, beyond which was the longest mountain range in the country. Out of the mountains flowed the ice-cold river that wound past the village and away across the plain down to the delta, I start to say. But then I say no. I'll tell you another story. About the sales assistant in the department store. His name was? His name was? I rub my chin. His name was. I don't know his name. But I first saw him one day when I was buying some new sheets for my bed. And I went to see him to get it all straightened out; get this cycle thing up and running. The sheets were reasonable quality. The quality was okay. I was worried that the material might go weird and rough. There's a name for it. But then someone pointed out that most sheets were made of the same mixture and seeing as most of the sheets I'd owned before had been okay I thought I'd risk it. I had in my head some fabric that had been around, say, two hundred years ago. All natural and rustic. Long lasting. Nostalgia, he suggests. Yes. I suppose so. Anyway. And the choice of colours was impressive too. I mean it was a cheap store. We weren't talking quality items. But then I'd noticed over recent years that lots of things had come down in price and the quality was good. And the range of stuff you could buy these days was awesome. I mean. When I was a kid. All those years ago. I can remember seeing films.

Big popular films about space and things. And about inhuman stuff. I look up and catch the man looking right into my eyes. Or where my eyes would be if I'd looked up. Which was a little strange. But the toys we had were just the usual things. The things all boys all over the place played with. Wooden guns from tied up sticks. Maybe a box lid for a shield. Nothing much related to a film that I can remember. But these days it's all films. The point is that the kind of stuff you can buy is just like in the films. And it's fantastic! I can see a film and go out and buy the same laser gun. Or I can get the whole outfit and it's identical to the one the guy wore in the film. It's amazing. I become the man in the film! There's no difference. You can see these people walking down the street and they are absolutely identical to the ones in the film. And now it's not just the kids. It's everyone dressed up out of a film and all immaculate replicas. They don't know even know they're not in the film.

I pause. The man nods and smiles. You were saying about a sales assistant. I murmur. Tracing back my thoughts. Yeh the first day I saw him was when I was buying these sheets. He stood out because of his walking stick. He had a walking stick: what looked like an anodised aluminium retractable walking stick red-pink in colour with a cherry-wood handle. So not just a walking

stick, he says. A specific walking stick. I think about it about and then agree. He had this stick and he had a limp; a really pronounced limp on his left leg. Same side he used the stick on. He had the same uniform as the other staff but all the other staff were women and girls. He was always the only male I'd see in that shop. I let the images of the man come back to me. Take me back to the store. The bulging gut; straining under a black shirt, doing its best not to spill over a pair of regulation black synthetic trousers. No wonder he had a limp. The weight of that gut would force a giant to its knees. Rock hard. Swollen. But the rest of him was not fat. His arms were slim and I suppose his legs were too. His face was slightly chubby. Especially as the hair had receded to reveal a good area of forehead; made it look all the rounder. Physical features that were complemented by his fixed and retarded smile. I mean he always was smiling. He came limping up this aisle towards me. The foot falls and that stick so unusual. Made me turn around when he was about ten feet away. The first time I saw him and that retarded smile.

And that was my first thought: poor guy. Had an accident? Got brain damaged and now he's moronically blissful. Had an aura of calmness and contentment too. Washed right over me and over the shelves of sheets stood by me.

Odd thing was he didn't acknowledge me in the slightest. I emphasise 'slightest', and the man frowns. I carry on. Made me feel like I wasn't there; like a ghost among the living. Just walked on past me and straight up to this lady who at that very moment. And this is the uncanny thing. At that moment so even she didn't know it was going to happen, caught the heel of her shoe in the cover of an electrical socket sunk into the floor. I suppose the cover was loose. And she went straight down on her face and cracked her chin. She'd not even hit the floor mind you and the assistant was struggling to get down on one knee to pick her back up. Like he knew it was going to happen. I stood and watched. The woman, not that old, maybe forty-five. Average size. Had blood coming off her chin and the assistant got her back up and gave her a clean white handkerchief to hold on it. Still had the same smile on his face. Put his arm on the woman's shoulder. Then they went off somewhere to get her cleaned up I suppose. I watched them disappear round the shelves. I can remember it. That was the first time.

The man waits for me a while. I saw him every time I went in the store after that. I found one day that I'd wound up in the store and I didn't even need anything. I needed to speak to this assistant. Just get him to acknowledge me because he never did. I said

I felt like a ghost first time I saw him and that feeling just grew. Every time I was there I saw him helping someone else and he never seemed to see me. It was a drag standing round the shelves. It made me feel uncomfortable. Waiting for a moment to grab his attention and get him to acknowledge me. But he never would. Never would follow me. Just wouldn't follow me. I felt this surge up inside me and started to get transported to the shop. Getting restless like I wanted to cry out: won't you follow me. I could see the man getting nervous and he shrunk back a little to the point where I stood up and so did he. I guess he was debating whether to exit the cabin or see how it panned out.

So I went up to the assistant. Straight up. Said to him: excuse me. Can you follow me to this section and give me some help. Can you follow me and give me some help? Can you help me out with this? Though it seems to be a drag. Saying it this way is uncomfortable. Won't you just follow me? Won't you just follow me? Please. I shouted it again. Please? I need you to just say I'm here. Because I am. Turn around and follow me. She says: you aren't really there. You and your words. Shouting at me all this time crying out for recognition. Recognition of what? That you aren't really you? That for all your talk of history and fragments the fact is you are not even right about being thrown into a stream.

I never saw her step out from behind the shelf until she was talking at me and, now, not only was she telling me nothing about love, she was telling me nothing about me. But as usual, she read my mind. The words aren't yours. And because they're not yours and never were, never were any of ours, you can't own them. And we can't use them to explain us. Worse is trying to string them together in odd ways or what you may think is novel ways. Doesn't get you any closer to the truth. All that does is take you further away or at best spins you round the flame one more time. Let me show you what I mean. Listen to this, she tells me.

I sit down to listen and she says: a new mystery has died and with it its spring. Look to the mountains as the last horde of primitives crawls down and spills out the caves to visit on us. They will never find their road back because the road was paved each step behind them by new primitives from new caves and new mountains. Good. Good. Let them stand bewildered as they look behind them and see what happened.

There you go, she says. What does that mean to you? I ask her if she is still speaking or if she has finished. She says she has finished and again asks: what does that mean? It brings some things to mind. I can't help but join the words together and make sense of it and tell her what it means. Yeh. And now tell

me a different meaning. So I re-join the words and do just that. Five meanings I give her in total. Now, she says, which one of your six meanings is the truth? I reply that it's one of these: the one I choose to act on and take further or the one that I weave into and re-write history or the one that you tell me is correct or the one that other people agree with, having fought with each other to the death. Which one is it? She replies it's the one that as far as your concerned makes me real for you. But none of them do that. What do you want? Something profound? Something in a sentence that can make it all good. You think by sharing words you can be at one with me? You think by leaving snapshots of your life for me to find that, will make you any more real to me? You are one side of a mirror looking at your reflection of me the other side looking at mine. You're no closer. Then she shrugs and walks back round the shelf.

I sit back into my leather chair and contemplate what has just been said. The old man looks concerned. I wonder if he can see me. I ask him that and he sits back into his chair. The lamp light throws shadows down my cheeks. I think you need to throw in some cataclysm. Something that can act as a centre for you. Something sexual? No. No I reply. That's just part of the same thing. Should you be giving me advice, he asks? Probably not. I

just want to use it as a test. See where it splits off.

Picture this: a girl in her twenties laying back on some large luxurious cushions with yellow stars, wearing just strings of amber beaded into leather that lay over her breasts. And down. Her right leg crosses over her left, bent slightly down at the knee, toes pointed downward. You can't see any strap that would suggest panties, or a thong. Not suntanned but darker than light skin. Dark dark hair with a kind of gold head band thing across her forehead disappearing under those long dark locks spilling down over shoulders and across one breast. Dark brown eyes. A thin leather strip tied round her right ankle and white pearl beads round her neck. Behind her the wall is deep red and under her an exotic rug with gold running through it. She holds in her left hand, propped up from her left elbow which lays on the cushion, a thin white cigarette coiling up a thin stream of smoke and her right-hand rests on her right hip. Her head tilts slightly to the right and she is looking straight into your eyes with an ambiguity just not quite ambiguous enough. The man pushes his shoulders back slightly. I see him try and suppress the automatic swallowing reflex. Her smell. His pupils dilate just a little. Describe it.



## X

As I mentioned, this isn't my natural line of work. I just fell into it. I had a knack for getting things out of people that they wouldn't or couldn't normally say to other people. I could nod a couple of times and murmur at just the right place, throw back some mirror like experience or provide a space the other person could see themselves in. Then they'd be off full tilt telling about the time they'd shat off the end of the bed in the middle of the night, too scared to cross the corridor in the dark. They tell me about that time when the Father was out with his friends and had left the study door unlocked. It was generally inconsequential but somehow had got entangled with an elaborate explanation of why they were what they were. They would talk and then feel a little better for as long as it lasted. They had been told or read or heard that this was the thing to do, so why not? And it made me feel like I was important. Or rather, that I was doing something useful.

Let's get the story straight. It was about as useful for ninety eight percent of them as a milk carton left on a hot day. A non-plasticised cardboard quart of milk. Top off. Direct sunshine. Admittedly: one or two seemed to find some more permanent value.

They would occasionally ring after a year or two or write a complicated letter charting all the plot convolutions that in the end just amounted to: it helped a bit. I would sit and listen. And try not to give advice or tell them of the things that were buzzing through my head on a parallel track. Like how, just an hour before you arrived, I had been sat out back and gazing through the heat haze to the hills across the other side of the low valley and a small brown bird mistook me for a bush or a tree and landed for a second on my knee. Before coming to its senses and without even having seemed to have twitched its wings disappeared and reappeared on a genuine bush about four feet from my right-hand side. It sat on the closest branch. Watching me out its right eye. It hopped round to watch me out of its left eye. It lingered, I assumed in my retelling, trying to make sense of the fact that it had nearly fucked up big time. Although I knew that birds didn't think as we think. But I couldn't tell people that sort of thing. They'd take it as a sign: what I am really telling you is not about a bird but about the spooky oneness that connects you and all things and which means you don't have to worry. Or: what I am really telling you is that life is something you tolerate at best, and you have to watch out for those rare moments of serenity that seem to come along out of nowhere. Stop and bracket off the shit for just

a moment and be at one with the bird. The truth, at least the truth in my version, is that the bird had indeed made a potentially very big mistake and that was about it. But it panned out okay for him this time. Next time he might land on a big black male cat.

The one time I had explicitly given advice ended in the guy getting turned into a lasagne by a passing car. A big, new, deep red saloon car. After many months of hearing him tell me how boring life was, how nothing ever happened, his fantasies for a better life and so on, I decided to try and break the impasse by trying something new. I had indeed heard him. It was a classic case of life being lived over there; not over here. That is to say: that's how it was for him. I doubted that his life was any less or more than one could hope for. At best. Nonetheless: I stopped him one day dead in his tracks. Mid-sentence. I said something like this: stop. Just stop a moment. Look at where you're sat. Look at the rug in front of you. Look at the sparks jumping around the fire. There's more here to wonder at than you need for a whole year! There's enough here to pre-occupy you for two years! Look at the rug. Follow the weave of brown wool to where it meets the red. Don't you wonder who did that? When it was made? Look at the logs stacked by the fire. You see that drying moss on the end of the middle log? You see the

drying cracks where they've been stacked for a couple of years? Don't you wonder what is behind them? Moss underneath? A louse down in the bark, which you can't see. The point is, I told the man, the questions are all here and so are the answers. It's all detail. You just got to stop and let it all join up. Actually, I reflected on this in situ, as it were: just stick with the questions. Delay the orgasm, so to speak.

The man stared at the rug. Then he stared at the firewood. He followed the sparks as they danced around around before fading back into the ash. His pupils dilated to take in the full form of the room's extant textures, lines, curves, shadows. Yes, he said. I see it. The point I was trying to make is that it's all here. Just like I told him. All the wonder you need and wherever you are. You just need to let it all sink in. It can trigger deeper questions, if you like. But it always provides the answer too.

Next time I saw the man he was grinning a loon post-epiphany grin. He had spent the entire week noticing things that had always been there, but now he was looking for them and joining up the dots into the big picture. So it went for a couple of months. Every week he'd turn up bang on time and tell me what he'd seen. None of this surprised me. I could explain it.

One day I took my own advice: I watched the old guy who lived next door shuffle down his garden path and stop, I imagine, just to take a moment out to notice and reflect. I projected into him my fear of loss. Nostalgia. Memories evoked. He may have been doing the same; remembering the past and all the different versions which never came about. He may just have been so out of breath from the effort of making the fifty metres from his porch that the old guy needed a rest. I watched him for maybe three minutes as he just stood there, slightly bent over, bad back, walking stick. Then I called out to him and he came back to the here and now. We spoke about a cat he'd seen. The weather.

I didn't see the man I had given the advice to again. I heard in a roundabout way some time later that he had been squashed by a big red car and mostly smeared down the street. A passer-by had reported to the police: yeh! I saw the guy. He was walking along no problem, he walked right up past me, turned up and noticed the billboard above the store opposite to where we were. I followed his eyes up. He said something like 'wow', to himself I guess, and then just stepped forward once. Maybe to get a closer look. I don't think he even clocked the road. Never saw the car. That was it.

As I said: this isn't my natural line of work. I'm not a good listener any more. When we

tell a story, we construct a narrative form for our experiences; positioning actors in time and space to give order and meaning to how we imagine these elements relate to each other stories, or rather the narrative act of stitching together images, affects, sensations and so on as they come to us, we would be unable to develop what you might call a 'self; instead left without meaning in a disconnected morass you couldn't even call a world. No heroes. No villains. No understanding of sex and love.

Trouble with stitching things together is twofold. The fabric we weave inevitably contains gaps and at some point we have to begin with a new thread. As with this fabric, our narratives also contain gaps, inconsistencies and re-beginnings. Reality is predicated on discontinuity. It tends to unravel. That's why you've got to work so hard. Constructing a narrative, rather than pointing towards a 'truth' or the reality of a situation or history, only serves to obfuscate and conceal this reality from us; providing instead: what? A palatable, normalised version of the world. No monsters at the end of the long field. Nothing to fear. Trouble is: the self is our most valuable fabric and our most important illusion. It depends not only on the stability of our own stories but also of the stories we are born into, adopt and weave into our own. As far as I can tell, these bigger

stories are all turning to shit. Amongst other things, they're saturated with pictures. Millions and billions of pictures from a billion billion cameras relentlessly snapping away here and there at that and this and whatever. The importance of pictures for the stories we weave is without question and the 'pleasure' associated with looking is partly instinctual. But when there's so many!

We leave trails everywhere we go. What the fuck can you do! The bottom line: each time we stare at a picture the picture stares back and in the image, in the act of looking, is an awareness of our self as just a simple object. As an object for the other. Nothing to us that the universe troubles over. It is the apparent integrity or wholeness of an image which threatens us in various ways such as: the anxiety of being an object for every other fucker that stares back at us breaks us down into a billion billion tiny fragments. Even the buildings stare back. So do the hills. The anxiety of coming to realise you're an object separate from other objects just makes your self that little bit more fragile.

This is about an image of a girl with bloodied head and face, skin, black hair and jumper layered with white dust. The blood appears vivid, dense. And the dust provides the girl with an already corpse-like countenance. The girl looks into the camera. The basket is still in her hand. We experience the abject. And

somebody somewhere is raising awareness. Of what? Nothing. We lose the distinction between self and other. It's strange. On the one hand we had no direct knowledge of the boy. On the other we were able to imagine such things based on abstractions from experience and learning and so forth. However, once we begin to incorporate abstractions into our beliefs about reality, what reality is gets a little more uncertain. But all of our engagement with and beliefs about reality involve the same uncertainty. Some people have no problem believing in the reality of the far side of the moon and yet they struggle to believe in a world before humans inhabited by dinosaurs, when what is in issue in both cases are similar questions about scale, albeit geographical in the former and temporal in the latter. But, he goes on, the blood doesn't look real and we find ourselves wondering whether it was an afterthought; an add-on.

Is your questioning of this a defensive response; a denial of the reality of the blood? I point out that the frame is cropped both in its spatial dimensions and in time. We can't tell what came before, what occurred after and neither can we see what is just out of shot at the moment the image was taken. We see behind the camera, behind the scene at the person wielding it or what has happened to bring the cameraperson to this place and in



position to take the shot. That means we have to fill in those gaps and yet we find that we can't or don't want to; it's more palatable if the picture stays in a grey area between reality and art. In this grey area we don't have to confront the implications of what either version says about ourselves or the Society we are involved in. Whatever is felt: fantasy maintains a distance between us and it. But that in itself is troubling.

## XI

Letters. The writing on the brown envelope said: photocopies as requested. If stapled together: back and front of same sheet. I'd read them once. But that was when I was in the hospital and I was sat with her and the psychiatrist. She was somewhere else that we couldn't get to. Me and the psychiatrist, a youngish woman I can't clearly remember, sat opposite her. She wore a gown that tied up at the back that I supposed they'd put her in. A white gown or maybe cream, with small flowers on it. We sat with her whilst the psychiatrist went through the protocol; determining how needy she was. She was needy enough I figured. The bandages on her arms said she was needy enough. The hospital was familiar to me, though the name had changed to something more restful. And we were in a new wing; the old quarter having been sold off as up-market housing. I wondered if that bothered the house-buyers: as they slept in A-wing the criminally insane slept in K-wing. The psychiatrist asked her how she felt. She took some time to reply but finally said she didn't want to be here. Though her eyes never flickered. Never had a flicker of life in them. The psychiatrist asked her what she meant by 'here'. She paused again. She didn't want

to be 'here'. I made a mistake in life. I will never do that again. Of course you will. And I could see me talking to the policemen after I'd kicked down the door because I'd looked through the window and saw her with a knife to her wrists and I had kicked down the door and wrestled the knife and the broken cups away. We both got her blood on us and then I sat on her and called her sister and called the police and the ambulance and I wasn't there because I couldn't stand that. Walled that off. Policeman said I had done okay and put his hand on my shoulder. Didn't feel okay. It couldn't be scratched. An itch between two fingers. Wanted someone to take control of me. In that empty house. And the doctor that assessed her said: can you go home? Will you be okay if we give you some tablets? And in one of the greatest moments of lucidity in my life I said to the doctor that in no shape or form or in any way willing or otherwise was that a possibility. The doctor saw sense. She didn't want to be here.

I visited her every day. She was on some tablets keeping a barrier around her. I'd go in and find her room. Laying on the bed. But not there in spirit. I can remember what it's like when the body gets de-animated and the spirits goes elsewhere. I'd heard that. But I'd eventually coax her up by explaining we could go and make a drink in the kitchen for ourselves. We could sit at a table and frame

off the insanity and we would have a cup of tea and even though we wouldn't say much, the structure was there. Something she could relate to. Something we could relate to. I would talk to her about a spider I'd seen making a little web. The rain. Nuts is what it had all become. Next to a power line the cool morning air; sat under a tree. I'd thank her for the tea. Nuts is what we'd become. Though we tried to ignore that. Every day I hoped she would wake up and just walk out of there and carry on.

After a while I came to recognise the other patients. Or whatever you call them. I remember one kid. A young man with sparkly eyes and dark brown hair; a little stubble. He smoked like it kept him alive. Never saw him without a cigarette butt burning his yellow fingers; dropping the ash. I spoke to him three or four times and eventually he started to come up to talk when I appeared. He relaxed. One day we were all sat in the TV room. The drug addict girl. The skeleton lunatic who always looked at the floor. Her. The crying woman. Some others.

I sat by the dark-haired boy and asked him what he did. He worked on a farm. Used to enjoy driving the tractor. Then he started to go distant and rambling on about the corn. Said something about driving with his Dad and a shotgun. Put his fingers to his head and

made a whooshing noise. Dropped his head. The rambling ground to a halt.

I sat down with the brown envelope ready to open it up, a long time later. It says on the envelope 'DS'. These are just photocopies of some letters that I read a long time ago. Just before I open the letters up I want you to know that I know how confusing you think it all it is when you stop and think about it. That we fear the same things. So I'll open the letters and read one:

Dear

I never know what to say. It doesn't help that I'm in a hospital-set up situation. Maybe when I get home I'll bounce back on form. How are you? How is everything going? Hospital this time is becoming a very positive experience; meeting lots of people and having a relaxing time. My drugs are making me feel battered. My head is recovering from a very severe mental illness. The drug kit is high. I think my drugs need changing. I need Slim-Food. I am sorry that the paper quality isn't higher this time sorry. There are floods everywhere. The letter is important but I'm lying on the bed and there's a pen in my mouth how this letter is important but I'm lying on a bed. I'm staring and I can see the bed cover. But I'm confused because I don't know. I fell off the bed. This is a monkey.

Have you seen help: let me out of year? This is a grandmother.

Yours sincerely

Language tries to slither away, shocked at its own impotency. Tries to make something other of it. A novelty, though that doesn't do it justice. I see the words shrinking away before me as they make for the border. It's all somewhat monotonous. There is, after all, a finite arrangement to take up. It's just that we can't detect the operating system. I told you that in several different ways.

## XIV

Now see what you think about this: a man up along a road stood next to a tan coloured car. Down the road and further on up the road: police. Got the road blocked. The man sees these police up on the verges, fencing in his brain all through the long day. Standing under the sun shuffling around. He's playing the games of love and laughter over and over. Playing through his childhood. Maybe there's still a way out of this? Maybe I can find redemption. The man says to himself. Those police waving the twelve-gauge at me. I got me a twelve-gauge. I got me a small child on the back seat here. Hey hey, the news chopper swoops overhead. I hope you lose a fuckin' tail rotor grins the man to himself. And he looses off a lazy shot upwards. Makes those police all lie in the dirt and get down tight behind those doors. It won't be long now. Man cradles the gun over his left arm and lights him up a cigarette. Ah! Yeh he laughs to himself! Now when you go, you go with a cigarillo clamped tightly in your jaw. Let the nicotine take its toll. Ah! Ha yeh. Those police keep talkin' at him through bull-horns. Make some sense pig, yells the man down the road. He watches a guy with a big moustache and a tan-check sports jacket move out from the wall of white cars. Thinks

to himself: won't be long. Mister. We understand how you feel! So says you. But I tell you: a life-times work to bring us here. You can't understand that. Yes we can, replies the man with the horn. The wind ruffles up his honey coloured hair and he's about a hundred yards away. We know what's happened, and I believe it won't be long until things work out for you. We will help you get where you wanna be, man. The enthusiasm kind of dies away just before he finishes. So the man with the twelve gauge takes a shot down the road at him. Misses all but a couple of wing-mirrors. Shoom-baaa! Makes those pigs dive under the tarmac! Then the man lets the barrel droop to the ground, and he touches his breast pocket. All this captured on news-cam. The bit in between the now and the then is missing. We'll get there. For now: that riles those pigs and they spring up like some dead army. Comes wailing up the road letting off all manner of weaponry. The man in the middle feels a little wave of disappointment. Looks at the small dark-haired child on the backseat of the car. Points the twelve-gauge at him just to see what it feels like. The child doesn't mind. So the man pulls back the hammer on that old gun. The child doesn't mind so the man grins and smiles at him. Then he turns back to those pigs squealing up at him. And stepping out from behind the



open door he shouts those pigs down: Hey! Hey! See what you think about this! See what you think about this. And the cigarette drops from his mouth as the barrel goes in. And the cigarette drops from his mouth and the barrel goes in. And the cigarette drops from his mouth and the barrel goes.

## XV

I get flashbacks of war. But I wasn't there. It disturbs me when I get a flash of a green field or some happy labourers working on the land. Something I understand as a common concern; an ideal that our culture shares. I don't get glimpses of the future and I worry that time can run backwards and forwards but only up to here. I feel this connect to the rest of the universe that flows through me. Every now and then the connect opens up and it's all for one. It's for me! It's a comfort because it means all those people I left are still here. Then I remember: it's all an illusion I throw up to make 'here' here.

There has to be a point to it; at least, I need a point. So I created this universe. There was nothing here before me. There's nothing when I'm gone and all the stuff in between is my own creation. I, as creator, determined that I would experience this particular existence with all that I decided to call 'human values'. I had a get-out clause. I can commit suicide at any time or even get killed or die 'naturally' and this current existence ends. I can't remember what comes next but I don't have to. When I get there, what comes next will be ready and waiting. I created that too. But the beauty of it is that I programmed in the human values; I committed to them. I

avoid dying. I'm not sure why. It sounds like it's got a lot going for it. I know it has. Apart from the getting there. And the envy of what you won't get to do or see, once you've gone. Somebody said to me once: well, you don't envy all the stuff that happened before you were born! They'd read a short book on philosophy. And I replied: well, yes I do! I envy every fucking event I never got to take part in. But it's okay really. I accounted for that too. Bodies are intersections of space and time where time and space do their thing. I threw in the odd paradox here and there. An adventurous refrain.

## XIX

I was wrong. It did change. How can you hear the cries of others and not listen? Do I care? Really. Do I care? I saw a woman walk past in front of me, who at once appeared alien: horrid. Dry. Decayed. At that moment, in that snapshot, again I realised how little we count for. Either go all the way. Or go away. That's very slick. You think it sounded cool. Very Cool. But actually it made you think about the motivation. No. Not in that way, I replied. How can you expect me to be in touch with my motivation? Well, I notice that you seem more motivated after a coffee. He smiled. So make me a coffee. And then I can explain how to incorporate that lie you've permeated for one and a half years. A year and a half. The coffee machine sits in the corner by the sink. Talking to itself with a gurgling lilt. With the cupboard on the wall above it where the coffee grounds are. Fresh coffee grounds. I watch him fill a glass jug with tap water and then fill the top of the coffee machine from the jug. He pulls out the cone shaped filter that also sits in the top of the machine and half fills it with the grounds from the cupboard. From a foil pack that re-seals itself. Literally re-seals itself. You can let go of the edges and just watch them slowly ease back together with a gentle sigh of relief.

He switches on the machine and looks round the kitchen for items that need tidying away. He looks out the window and sighs to himself, leaning forward slightly on the kitchen sink. Well it seems to me the first thing you need to get clear is that bag. That bag has to go back. You just can't keep that bag. He murmurs. Pondering it over. But if it goes back. Then what do I have left? What's the point? That bag is my whole purpose. It is here. It's past. Future. Ties all those things together. What the hell would I do? He glances at the coffee machine that's just starting to puff a little. I think about what he says. I think about coffee. I'm sure that if you take the bag back. And it is taken back. Then you would feel a whole lot better and the next thing, the thing that will fill up the space for you, will fall out. Can I have just a half sugar? Just put a little in it. He opens up the wall cupboard and takes out a red jar with a space in the lid for a spoon. Gets two mugs down and puts them by the sink. One has a picture of a motorcycle on it. Some kind of blue chopper with a big fat back wheel. The other one is plain white. But dirty with the stains of coffee around the lip. The inside is tanned with a life-time of coffee, tea. Occasional beverages of unknown origin. He puts the sugar in the chopper-mug. He doesn't take sugar or milk.

And the next thing that pops out for you might be the real deal. It might be way better than the bag. In the long run. So much better. I bet you can't even imagine what it might be. Just check that milk is ok, will you. It may not be. He opens the milk carton and cautiously lifts it to his nose and nods. I just can't imagine it. If I give the bag back, it's, well it's a risk in itself. What if he decides to turn wicked? You see what he does. This is true. I know what he does or might do. But it doesn't feel it would go that way. It really doesn't. My instinct and my power tells me not that way. And I say that. He nods. The coffee jug is full to the line. The water steamed up and falls down through the coffee, dissolving out the black flavour and condenses into the jug. He fills up the mugs and adds the milk. Puts the jug back on the hot plate. I put the mug on the table: it's too hot to drink and he puts the white mug on sill of the window.

Now. Look. I shift in the chair. The lie. The lie you been telling yourself. Where did you get the bag? I already know the answer to this. So it's a rhetorical thing. You see the thing is: that's the lie. It never happened like that and I been waiting for you tell me my version. Because that is not the version. He looks astonished. Genuinely astonished and screws up his face and just his head at me to get a closer look. I can't say anything and just

have to wait for it to come out. He rolls his eyes past me and up to the ceiling like the answer is up there spinning round with the cooling fan. Or fizzing out the light bulb. He hunts for the inspiration for some time and I let him. But when it doesn't come he turns back to the window and just stares out across the flat desert; an old fence half way between here and there. One fifth of the way to the mountains in the distance. And the train appears. The tracks running along where the fence is. We open the door and step out into a slight dusty breeze to watch the train go by in the distance. The far-off rattle-rumble of metal wheels. I look at the two engines pulling from the front and the oil-fumes that drag behind them. He sighs and then tells me the version I know. When he finishes, the train is long gone. By dusk, we had come up with the plan and he was feeling a little more positive. We finished the coffee and agreed that not hearing the cries of others does not mean you don't listen. Or care.

## XVII

And off we set with the black bag in the trunk of the car. The drive to the restaurant is some two hundred miles of desert, mountain passes. The plains. Blue sky. The car whispers along barely touching the straight roads and the peaceful land. His brown boots are up on the dashboard keeping time with an old tune that fades in and out on the radio. I drive this road. I own it. Other cars or trucks are a rarity. So when we do come upon a car I glance over to the driver and they glance back. They don't have the black bag in the trunk, though. And they probably wouldn't want it. They may have a dead girl in there or maybe just some clothes; a suitcase of clothes. Tools, rope, oil, pump, shovel. Blanket. The car eases up and I ease ahead of it. Looking in the mirror all I can see is the driver silhouetted against the flat horizon. Getting smaller and smaller. Disappearing into the heat haze. Quietly merging in and then. Gone.

The endless journey in this desert is the thing. We glide along in our little world making just a whisper. The passenger pulls out a crumpled carton of cigarettes. He arches his back up and carefully extricates the crumpled pack from his jean pocket. He carefully solves the crumpled flip lid and



slips out a bent smoke. Why keep 'em in that pocket? They always get squashed. He holds the bent cigarette in his lips and flips up the lighter with the recognisable click. It's kind of a two-part sound: click-ka. Click-ka. It kind of sounds like an old bolt-action rifle being cocked; strangely soothing. The sound always feels vaguely familiar but on a really deep level. Something innate, maybe.

I met a girl once who told me that men who pull a crumpled pack of smokes from their back jean pocket did something for her, he explains. He explains that when she was distracted he slid his packet of cigarettes from the pristine space of his jacket down into the squashed back of his blue jeans. And then quietly mashed them in with his hand. The girl came back from somewhere in the depths of the party a few minutes later and he took that opportunity, when she was talking and looking straight in his face, to smoothly slide his hand back, pull out the crumpled packet, pull out a bent cigarette and without glancing at it or paying it any attention at all slip it between his lips. And kept looking straight at her. Listening. He explained that she stopped talking and looked straight at the cigarette and then to the packet in his hand. Then back to the cigarette. Then she made a sound like a stifled laugh and he realised the mistake he'd made. Click-ka.

The car whispers along. The passenger winds down the window a little and the blue smoke meandering around draws out into the dry desert air. So he kept his smokes crumpled up from that point on. Reminds him who he was. Fifty miles passes. Hey; I say to him. We all have our little scripts. What do you say about that? He answers straight away saying: no I don't. I don't think anything. It comes along as I need it. It's already there, I guess. That's impossible; but I'm only half engaged with this. For me it's impossible. Impossible, I assert and then say: give me one of those cigarettes. Click-ka.

Car swooshes along the black road in the desert. Lots of space and quiet. Lots of space. After a few quiet moments, maybe a quiet mile or two and one or two specks of ash on the dashboard I try and explain that what he says agrees with what I know. Or think. Look. I had this experience once. Let me explain.

I was in a restaurant somewhere I forget. Somewhere dirty. The waitress was friendly. But the guy in the kitchen, her man I guess, was less than friendly and could only be what nature intended him to be. So when I shot him. Or stabbed him. I forget which it was now. I knew exactly how it would go; what he would do. Say. What I would say. Do. It's all scripted. Why don't you rescue that fly that's been bashing it's head on the windshield? He

reaches to the fly and coaxes along to the side window. Rolls it right down so the fly gets sucked out into the desert. And essentially you said that without realising it. You said that 'it comes along as you need it'. And that means that it's scripted. Maybe you didn't script it but somebody did. Or something. In fact I believe it forms in between people just at the moment it's needed. And that means it might already be there. That's what you said. I think. So it's the same thing. I think I just confused me and go quiet. But he doesn't say anything. So maybe he doesn't notice. I'm only half engaged, anyway. I don't recall what we've been saying. Light me another cigarette. Click-ka.

A hundred miles. And then some. What about the bag? He turns around a little in the front seat. It won't get you if you don't want it to get you. As long as you hold it in mind. Hold what it is in your head then it will stay at a distance. It won't concern itself. But the moment you stop. Pause. Paying it attention. Then it may get you. It works itself out in the most insidious ways. Like a cancer I saw once. A cancer that was all teeth and hair. Gristle, bits of bone, brown liquid mush that opened up just spilled out made everyone go white. The dry white realisation of just how much mush we all are. And how the mush easily forms into something so real that you can't escape it. You don't see it coming and

you can't prepare for it. I don't reckon you ever reconcile yourself with that.

She'd smoked for a life time and only in the last decade converted to filter-tips. Busied herself in a small one bed apartment being really friendly to the passers-by, the neighbours. Had been married at one time to a war veteran who didn't speak much of that. But they were happy enough and just counted off the days until he had gone and she was left. She stayed for a couple of years in the big house with just their last dog. Then he grew old too. The greyness overtook them both and then she was the only one left. Some days, when the day had grown old, she would look up and across the room and realise how long she'd been sat at the kitchen table. The remains of a sandwich still on the plate with the bread crust dry curled up at the edge. The day had gone. The light was dimming down to just a black and white frame round the shapes in the room. The apartment was a downsize to a different town. Closer to what could be called family. One day I happened in to see her after a couple of days in the desert. I don't know why. I got the feeling to swing by and detour to see her out of the blue. She was more than happy to give me a cup of coffee and spend the afternoon telling me how I need to take care, look after children. Thank somebody bigger and more substantial than me for putting me here. I

was happy to see her and felt a certain closeness that went straight to when I was much more, or less, together. Less acquainted with the world; that's for sure. So we drank coffee and the day was pleasant and warm. Two weeks later I sat by her hospital bed wondering if she was dying. A day later I sat by her hospital bed and the black and white frame had gone, leaving just a black space behind. Another day and the consciousness of my presence came and went and by the end of that first week I sat by her skeleton as it breathed and rasped in bursts. There's a name for it; the sound of the dying breath. I watched this growing lump emerge from her right breast. It pushed up through the bandages that had been put to keep it in; keep it hidden. But it wanted to make itself known and sent out brown-yellow mucus that seeped out from the edges of the gauze. It reached out to us. So when a quiet time of afternoon came and the nurses were down the ward tending here and there, I took the opportunity to pull round the curtains. The stillness may have been in my head or it may have been that someone decided to give me just a little space whilst I went about my task. I pulled back the thin yellow stained sheet and slipped down the bed gown. The pale blue flowers stained also. And I slipped a finger under the bandage, one on either side of the breast and gently pulled it away from

the tissue underneath. And then I lifted it up the chest. I just looked silently at the place where the bandage had been. I said to her: how did it come to this? Why didn't you do something? There was a nurse stood behind me. And another. They saw the drawn curtains. We looked on and said nothing. The day had passed us by.

We sat and watched it disappearing behind the mountain range behind the town which we looked down upon and across the flat distance of the valley floor. A collection of pin-prick lights spread across maybe a mile side to side. And above it, above the yellow dirt ribbon that traced the skyline a million billion more pin pricks. But each one more hopeful than those they signalled down on. I followed them up and over my head. Left and right. Round and round and round and watching them get brighter and brighter as the day finally left us behind. We listened to the stillness and the cool air settling around. Dampening our clothes and skin. We heard the metal car shrinking and creaking; resting itself down into the dust. You could be forgiven for thinking, up here in the stillness, that the world had made peace with itself. That it had stopped. That people were sitting down in their front rooms and kitchens and lying side by side in their beds and talking to each other. Saying: that's it. It's finished! It's all okay now. And smiling as they closed their

eyes and looked forward to a bright new tomorrow.

That's what I was imagining as I turned to look at him. Just able to make out his shape as a darker patch of background. The sound didn't register at first. I was looking towards him. Looking just to the side and above and trying to get the shade of a silhouette. It must have been just under the threshold of awareness that he wasn't moving at all. The sound, also, was just under the threshold. But as it gained volume and drew my attention I became still. Not breathing. Listening to the sound but unable to make out where it came from. I began to sketch it out: regular pulse about a second - second and half duration. Four or five second silence. Second, second and a half low, resonant boom; part animal, part machine. Couldn't guess the distance between us and the sound source and couldn't give form to its creator. Maybe it is only sound. Disembodied as it makes its way across the desert floor and up in the desert sky. Making its way round and round the world looking for something. But as the sound continued unbroken in its own form I grew uneasy; it imposed itself and used me to take on a shape. I could choose to let this shape grow. Or I could choose to push it back out. I struggled to do either. I watched the pin pricks on the valley floor vanish in a wave from left to right only to reappear a

second or so later and hadn't realised that he'd come up stood beside me. He put a hand on my shoulder and said look up behind me. Whispered.

Behind us was a ridge. Hard to make out the distance but the ridge was not that high above us. And coming up from behind the ridge were three beams of white light that bobbed back and forth. Sometimes all pointing up and sometimes shining in different directions. Three light beams jerking slightly; about the same pace as a man walks. What do you reckon? I whispered that it might be nothing. Might be something. The sound came across the desert and the light beams searched for something. The car creaked and shrank and we watched. Without a warning he called out into the night; towards the beams. A long, low resonant call that even before it faded into the darkness triggered something. Triggered some kind of response; some kind of need to conceal because at the same moment the call left his lips and even before it could possibly have had time to travel up to the ridge I watched the lights vanish. Leaving behind just the stars. Billions of stars looking down on us.

And at that moment the sound stopped also. There was a pause, and we waited. Watched to see what was going to happen. We listened to the space around us. It rendered that town



a million miles away. But a third presence now made itself known with us; appearing somewhere nearby. The air was still. I felt it watching; waiting to see what we were going to do. It watched. Maybe the sound had used me to take on a shape. I couldn't have prevented that. But I struggled not to give the sound any more of a shape than it might already have got from me. I tried not to imagine what it could look like. The light beams stayed switched off and then it was moving. The stars just above the skyline went black and slowly lit up again. It was moving slowly to our left and around us. The gun wasn't going to be any use. And anyway, it was in the trunk along with the bag. The bag could be useful, I whispered to him. He didn't say anything, then slowly I felt him edge away and towards the car. Heard the trunk lock click and the lid glide up. Something out there wants retribution and that's why it had come. And I realised that if the bag was used then it was gonna make the situation much worse. But that thought came too late and try as I might to rewind it I just couldn't do it. The thought got stuck right in the middle. It took that long, a rewind moment, for it to pull itself into a proper shape and come rushing across the short distance to the car. Then it showed me what it was. Standing over him. And there you now stand. Maybe fifteen feet from the car and

barely able to make out the darker patch against the dark sky. When did you last see your daughter? Your lover? The chilled air spills down into your throat. So cold. Falling through the ice down. Feel the space around; feel the distance between you and the rest of humanity safe behind their doors. It's between you and the car but even if you could somehow work round and past, get in the car, close the doors, it can flow through the gaps in the floor; the gaps around the glass, up through the vent pipes and heating duct. That sick feeling in the pit of your stomach and blood racing behind your eyes. Your heart beats fast. Races. A whine. Stops. The point about the Werewolf is this: there are two kinds of things and only two.

## XX

This guy works in a store. He has a bulging gut but his heart was in the right place. It really was. He thinks he got shot in the knee; for no clear reason. Late one night, maybe eleven; a cold night in late Spring. He was sat alone watching TV and drinking coffee from a dirty glass cup. There's a tap tap tap at the door. The guy doesn't register it; not sure whether it's from this late-night film he's watching or what. Tap tap tap. He turns his head to the sound this time. Loud enough to take his attention. Makes his heart jump a little so he sits and waits now fully engaged to the sound. Waiting for it. Tap tap tap. A few scenario's play through his head and he eases himself up off the dust-red sofa, grips the grimed-up arm. One scenario is the police come to tell him there's been an accident. Another scenario and no one's there. Just the empty street; the dirty yellow lamp across the way, throwing out a feeble glow. He stands in the door frame looking out into the dark trying to make out a movement or a shape. The last scenario and he is dragged away by people unknown and locked in a hole under the ground and dies slowly, losing his mind. Tap tap tap. He turns on the porch light and through the glass and through the screen door he can see a man stood there. But can't

see his face. What's up? What do you want? Open the door. Well what do you want? Open the door; I need to tell you something. This guy opens the door with one hand, hitching up his pants with the other. He opens the screen door and feels a searing pain in his left knee. He gasps from the shock, consciously catches up with it and then shouts out the pain. The gunshot doesn't register until much later when he's crumpled on the floor, trying to crawl away at the same time as fumbling to shut the screen. Never knew why anyone would do that and found out nothing more. But the limp is there, and the fear. It defies sense.

Not everything does make sense; it's only an effect. You have to work hard to make sense of even the mundane because, quite often, things aren't that worldly at all. And for the unfortunate fellow: he could only try to make sense of it. So that's what he did, all he did, from that point onwards was replay the moment again and again and again and again. The terror subsided after a while and left in its place a residue that stuck to everything; tainted the walls a dirty, greasy yellow and the air was stagnant with it. The man couldn't clean it off himself and he took on the jaundiced hew of an alcoholic in the last bloated rock-hard gut days just before the end.

For some long time, he lingered at this point. The first thing he woke with and the last thing he thought before falling into a restless sleep. Trying to make sense of something that wouldn't. But eventually the remains stabilised itself into a shape where all the fat and muscle from all over his body liquefied and filled his belly. Harder and harder like a steel case. He stayed in that same house. Stayed sat on the same brown orange sofa listening and watching all day. And listening harder and harder until eleven o'clock came in the evening and went by day after day after day. The next day would be the just the same, but with his shirt slowly blending in with the colour of his skin. He was caught in this endless loop of an ebb and flow of dread, of anticipation, of relief and watchful waiting for the opportunity to make sense of it all. And round again and so on. But the sense never came.

Dreams came every night. Sometimes he thought he'd been given a clue on waking and he'd fumble for the notebook and pen kept by the bed on an old stool. A dozen or more thick note books piled up in the corner; all of them a record of anything he thought might hold the answer. Dreams and thoughts. Odd moments of insight that didn't connect with any waking thought he was having. In other note books were recorded the themes he imagined. Threads pulling it all into the

answer. It got so that he would flick through a book and would read a passage and was unable to tell if it was a dream or it had happened or it was a thought. Or something he watched on his TV that always had the sound turned down to a whisper.

The house around him changed a little each time he slept; resembled the houses in the dreams in the books more and more. The walls grew yellower. The walls in his dreams were flaky, derelict. The houses had parts missing or rooms that didn't connect up. You could stand in a first-floor bathroom and look out across the rubble-landscape as water trickled out of disconnected pipes and the plaster cracked and fell down in sheets. You could hurry past a grey formless library and shrink from the murk that seeped out to cover the ground in a layer of filth.

The people in the dreams he knew occasionally. He recognised a woman from the past and her daughter. But he couldn't remember if he was asleep or awake. He could listen to the harmonica music coming from behind him as he walked up a familiar path and say to the man playing: you have to articulate into it. You have to pronounce different words to make it play. To make it talk. And he could bear to look at the other man with the ruddy face and a nose blown out by whiskey or maybe some disease. These

men used to cause him anxiety. But now he didn't know.

One day a woman handed him a piece of paper and he knew it was an interpretation. She wanted to help him with an answer. He looked at it and knew as much; even though she hadn't spoken. On one side were many eyes all looking at him; patterned together like fish scales. He thought it meant she could see into him. He thought it meant the repetition of things. On the other side were random symbols. One of them stood out and he said to the woman that it was a symbol from his past. She asked which one, but when he tried to point it out he couldn't see it. So she gave him a pencil and he tried to draw it for her. The symbol was too faint so he pressed hard to make the faint pencil work harder. But he knew she wouldn't see it. So he spoke about it instead and explained how the symbol was from his childhood. She asked him what it meant and he explained that he'd been afraid of death. But this symbol now told him otherwise. Then what are you afraid of? The man sat and stared at nothing. After a while he answered.

The house was yellow all over now. The cupboards were empty, save for the tin of polish with the rusted rim and some gloves. You couldn't tell where the house began and the man ended in their mutual, blended dereliction and you could barely see through

the windows painted cigarette-tar yellow with intent. I ask the man how he gets from here to the store. He starts up with his mouth hung open; just hanging there for what must seem to him like a long time. But in reality it isn't.

I watch him edge away round the sofa and tell him to sit down. Which he does. With his mouth still open. How do you get from here.....to the store? I don't know. Blink a couple of times. With his left hand and with the palm of his left hand brushing the surface of the sofa across the cushion and up the arm he reaches for a small notebook. When his fingers make the brown cover he snatches it to himself and frenzies through the pages; looking for this dream. I let him murmur to himself and watch a yellow finger race up and down the lines from page to page. Which page are you on? When was it? I'm not in that book. Nor any of the books. I'm here in front of you. How did you get here? I came in through your front door. You let me in. What time did I let you in? Just now, around midday. Did you shoot me? No. Will you shoot me? No. What do you want? His yellow skin glistens. I want to help you, but to help you I need to know how you get from here to the store. I don't work in a store. The man looks confused but softens a little; relaxes very slightly. No. You don't work in a store. But you will do. You're gonna work in the home-



furnishings department, mainly. You're gonna re-stock the shelves, make sure the displays are square, do what the man tells you and you're gonna help customers around the shop. Showing 'em where things are. You are here to help me? Yes I am. Can you show me where the towels are? Yes I can. Come this way. That's the kind of thing you'll be saying to the customers. The man blinks and says nothing. Who shot me? Nobody shot you. You weren't shot. The man blinks. He grips the fabric of the sofa with his right hand. I wasn't shot? I wasn't shot. No. I wasn't; you're right. How did you know that? Because of my friend: Rescue Me. Who are you? I'm gonna help you. I said that already. Now, you tell me about that store. Just close your eyes and picture how to get there.

The man closes his eyes and sits back into the sofa. Its red colour shows through just a little. The muscles around the eyes slowly relax. The muscles around his mouth smooth out and the colour fades back into his dirty blue stained shirt. But the Yellow is fading. It's on Tenth Street, he says. Tenth Street? Yes, Tenth Street. I get there at eight o'clock and if I don't want that driver on my back I have to be first at the stop. The bus stop? What does the store have? He's in the trance now. He blows out of his nose. We got what you need. We got more than you need. I guarantee you will leave with something. We

won't sell you crap. It's something I guarantee you will need. He's smiling to himself with his eyes still closed and all the wrinkles gone from his face. And barely yellow now and his belly, whilst still round, gives just a little under his belt. I work on the third floor. No, the second floor. His face is round and his hair receded right back across the top of his head. Now look. I lean towards to him. Look. I want you to remember something of this but not all of it. I'll leave you a token that you can wonder about. It's about how you felt before, how you felt during and how you feel now. And from here on: it's better for you when your eyes open. I hold out the cane and his eyes open; fixed first on me and then on the cane. Did I own this already? No. I brought it with me. I think I already had one like this. He takes the cane and stands up leaning off his left leg. I stand up and say: don't fly too high. You will get shot.

## XIIX

Life. The point about the Werewolf is this: a popular conversation about categories of things. One subset of that conversation is about two categories: things you can imagine and things you can't imagine. You could spend a long time trying to imagine something you can't, but you can't. That's it. There's nothing else to say. But the other type of thing, the thing you can imagine is much more of a problem. It's a comfort believing in the laws of physics because they generally, that is in the everyday sense, they generally fulfil our expectation and make the world a predictable place to be. In the very local and very everyday sense of the word. An apple drops off a table and it falls to the ground. A fuse will burn out if you pass too much current through it and so on. That's a good thing. We need to believe in these rules because if there are rules and the rules involve causal relationships between things then we know how things are going to behave. And if we know that, they're less of a threat. It extends to people too. We spend a lot of time making up rules that can tell us what this person is gonna do in this situation, or what this bunch of people will do if you put them in that context and turn the heat up. The point is to make them all less of a threat

too. People kid themselves that they like adventure. That they thrive on new experiences. When it comes down to it, whether it's the monotony of going out your front door each day for forty years and catching the same train for forty years to do the same job with the same company being told by the same boss the same jokes at the same points each year for forty years. Or whether you get off jumping off tall things all over the world. Whether it's big or small, so subtle you can't see it: you'll be following a predictable pattern. Your own predictable monotonous routine. Keeping it safe. Try and laugh it off. And then look back over the last year, ten years. You'll see it. Predictability is a commodity. That's what you buy in every shop and with every finance deal. For you and your children. That's where it is at right now. And the bed-mate of predictability is probability.

Flip a coin and it's fifty-fifty. But would you bet on getting ten heads in a row? Probably not. That's where the subjective comes in. The thing is that most people for some reason that they probably never thought about are not gonna bet on ten heads because it just doesn't happen. They think that they're lucky if they flip three. The thing that most people don't stop to think about was that there is absolutely no bearing of how many times they flipped a head on the next head coming

up. Each event is unrelated and the chances of getting ten heads in a row or a hundred are possible. It just doesn't feel like it. It just doesn't feel: right. Does it? Sure enough across a million flips of the coin there may be a tendency for equal numbers to fall out but in that million throws who's to say you didn't get a hundred heads straight followed by a hundred tails? You had absolutely no part to play in it. It's just a case of the point at which you enter the story.

People use probability to make decisions when in fact they don't have any control over what happens at all. Would you play roulette with a six-chamber revolver with one bullet in one chamber? Spin it for a million dollars? Would you play roulette with a million-chamber revolver still with one bullet in it for a million dollars? No sane person even considers the first one. Sane? But you may find yourself pondering the odds of the second one. What if? But who can say in which of the million chambers that bullet is. You like to believe it's nowhere near the one you picked. But who can say? You have no control over it whatsoever.

Physics may have been a pretty sane affair but it bends over itself now messing at the fringes; coming up with ever-more ingenious ways to cheat the odds and keep the predictability going right up to and past the edge of the universe. And even that notion is

up for grabs. Even the notion that thinking about an event is more likely to make that event occur has made it into the plot. And if you watch the event then you are sure to have a huge effect on the outcome. But all in the quest to maintain predictability.

So imagine something right now and ask yourself: what's the chance of that happening? Think of the least likely thing to happen that can be thought. There's a kid sat in school in middle of the day. It's a normal high school in a normal town where nothing strange ever happens and no goes missing and no one is shot any more than in any other town. Normal. Struggling with a math problem and chewing the pencil. This young kid looks out the window of her ground floor classroom and says to the teacher: Miss, there's a lion outside looking at me. Think of a scenario where this is possible and maybe it doesn't seem so strange. It actually happened. You can read about it in a newspaper. The thing with the type of things you can imagine, the types of thing you can think, is that they may not be probable as you understand it. But are they impossible? Can you be sure that they're gonna happen? Or that they're not? Can you imagine the absolutely craziest thing you can think about and then conjure up an equally crazy and unlikely scenario by which it can occur? That bead of sweat gathering on your forehead is

predictability seeping away and heading for the door. People lose their job. People cheat. People go missing. Can you be sure it will never happen? That door across from you. That closed door. What's behind it? Say to yourself aloud the things that you know are behind the door. Take your time. Those many predictable things that are there because they're always there. It's a safe world you live in. But I know there's something different behind that door that at the moment is closed. It's crouched low to the floor. It breathes quietly to itself so that you can't hear it. Yet, if you could, you might think that the way it breathed belies the anticipation of what it's going to do to. It crouches to the floor but when it stands up it towers over you. Its dark claws are longer than your fingers and they hook over sharp like needles. Its ears prick forward and can hear you now. Yellow eyes betray its design. The dark fur that runs thin from its snout down thickly on the shoulders and upper-arms before thinning again at steel-sinewed feet. Not grey, nor brown nor any colour you can name because when you see it, all you get is just an impression. And you won't see it for long. It's waiting. Just behind that door, that it knows you are going to open. Crouching low to the floor. You like to think it isn't there because you live in a predictable world. But if you imagined it. It's possible. And the beauty of it

is: you only get to open the door once. Sit still for another couple of minutes and stare at the door. Listen carefully. Check you are breathing. And when you are ready and are absolutely sure it's safe to do so. Go and open the door.



# I

So in this photograph are a boy and a girl. The boy sits on the ground to the left and the girl lies on the ground to the right. Her head's under a shopping bag and he's got a sack on the ground next to him. About as big as himself. Cloth sack. The shopping bag has a woven in twist diamond pattern running around it. Could be red and blue or blue. Yellow? But you can't tell from the black and white photo. The ground is hard. The grass is coarse. Sparse. When you go to a fair in the middle of summer and the grass is cut short and trampled on by a thousand people. When the fair goes: that's what the ground is like. Ten or so feet behind the boy and girl lies a narrow worn-in path. Maybe a thousand people passed that way or ten thousand. Running, walking, limping. Being carried or carrying someone. Just trying to get away. Leaving behind the debris of displaced humanity. Fragments of paper. Possessions no longer worth possessing. Valueless. The girl is lying on her right side; her right knee bent forward and the left leg almost straight but you can't tell if she wears shoes from her right foot hidden under her leg and the left foot lying outside the frame. The boy's leather boots are worn but his suit with three-quarter trousers and white collar out shirt is

clean. The boy stares into the distance and holds his world in that cloth sack in his right hand. That's where he lived for five years. And the photograph is only one thousand years old. The boy could still be here.

I watch the paper scraps blow around and the shopping bag gently gives just a little but doesn't fall away. This time, the boy takes his hand off the bag and rubs his face. He glances over to the girl and looks at her for a long time. The wind ripples across her skirt. The boy looks out of the photo and right at me. I understand. And after thinking about it for maybe no more than six seconds I start slowly winding it back. The boy looks back to the girl. The hand goes to the top of the sack. The wind whips across the paper fragments and the broken grass moves only slightly. A long while later the feet of people can be seen on the path. Sometimes one or two, a small group. A great crowd. Moving from right to left and back to wherever they came from and through all of it the boy is sat there. But as the light grows stronger and the breeze gives way to stillness: the boy is suddenly stood over the girl and holding the woven basket over her head and at once he's away from her and the basket is on the ground and I see the girl clearly. This part will pass. The boy gazes down at her and cries and shakes. I let it slow. Nearly at the point where it can be stopped. The girl is on her feet and figures

move around them. I stop the photograph. The scene is different. A point in time just before all the versions split off in a billion directions. A billion different outcomes. The girl is stood slightly hunched; facing to the right out of the picture and behind her is a man pointing a rifle to her head. The back of her head. Brown hair across her face. His legs are braced; the rifle butt tight into the shoulder looking down the gun sight. The muzzle only a narrow space away. His finger is less than a second from squeezing the trigger. Less than a second between it and the single outcome that the boy and I have seen. I struggle to make sense of this new snapshot of time because I know exactly what follows and so does the boy: sat on the ground with his horror of what will follow. His horror. I try to penetrate the picture and do away with the frame; see the surround. Make sense of how it all came to this. But I have a limit and despite my greatest effort nothing reasonable can be said about it. We have to endure it and a million identical other acts. The man sits back in his chair and murmurs something to himself and then smiles at me. Waiting for as long as I need to take. So I say: that's about it! That's what it is now. You have the girl with a rifle pointed at the back of her head. So what? The horror of the scene you are with. And you have seen the outcome? You can't make any sense of that. I

listen to what he has to say but don't reply. If I do there's a danger of a crack appearing and who knows what it opens up into. It takes some time to suppress. The man encourages me to say what I feel. That is: what my body is feeling right now. I say that in the main and for most people, lives really aren't that dramatic. That scene, which was a dramatic moment many years ago: all we can do is project our fears into the image and extract some fantasy that it all turned out okay for that girl. That may have been the only dramatic moment in her life! Just happened that a boy with a camera was passing by. Captured the moment. The soldier lowered his gun, he was just a bully after all; not a killer. He went on his way. Just caught up in a moment. The girl went on her way too. The rest of her life was mundane. Nothing happened. Everyone survived.

Peoples' lives: they're dramatic in stories. They're generally not dramatic from the inside out. Only in some parts of the world for some people some of the time. So we jazz 'em up. Most people are born into a mundane world. That's what mundane is. Live a mundane life and die like that. I speak only of what is loosely my culture, but it doesn't even apply to other persons in those other parts of the world all the time. Sometimes it does, as I mentioned. It may in fact only seem mundane from over here but over there, even

though your neighbourhood gets shot up every day, it's mundane for them. And on the topic of culture, that dumping ground for shit ideas and excuses and a means of signalling/identifying who is in what group/class [I read that somewhere; I think in a magazine in a hospital waiting room], I don't mean this is a cultural-relativity thing, you know. I can't understand a word you're saying or what your mundane life is really like cos you're just not the same as me. You are not me. However, we're all the same basic organism so we look for the universals. Shoe-horn them in. What do all cars have in common: four wheels. They drive. Planes have wings: they fly. People: we feel pain. There are other things too. But it's easier to build a story around pain than the other things, and there's so many different ways to do it and so many different places to start. It's like a mix and match menu of a few basic devices, but the outcomes are all the same. The old man enquires about the limited form of narrative; that we can only tell things in a limited number of ways. Is that what I mean? Yes it is, I tell him. Of course, but there's more to it. These stories we tell are organising devices at every level of being. Individuals fuck up and rise from the ashes and so do nations. People love that story. Some impoverished kid with one eye from birth and a mother who was never loved

makes it from the poor house, up the cobble track, up the gilded ladder and saves a million other poor fuckers on the way. We all benefit from that! We can do that! I can do that! Give me the same helping hand the kid got when he broke his back, and things took an even worse turn, and I can do that! People really love that one because it gives them hope that they can be the same. And come out on top. What they don't see is the side lines, the wrong turns, the kick in the ass, the missed opportunities, the bad decisions the good decisions. The other players just skirting the stage. They don't see the ragged fabric woven from threads of empty gestures, vacuous words. If they saw all those things, the people, they'd get lost in the confusion. But that is the reality of it. There's no straight path through this life and into the next. The best thing you can do is stop adding to the confusion. Keep your mouth shut. Don't kid people there's a way out. Any attempt to do so leads to illusion. Words fall apart. Worlds fall apart.

So I remind him the whole state of affairs is not held together in that way. He sits further back into that worn chair; always in the corner always under a lamp turned on. We have to sell everything to buy the key to the door and most people can't afford the buy. He says to me: my friend died forty years ago. I watched her come one night in ignorance of

the doorway. I heard, not so long after, the doorway opening. Sometime more and the doorway closed. The elements reconstituted themselves. The elements made me cry as I had learned to cry. It's an ancient story. One of 'those' stories you describe. We put our kingdoms up for sale but they never raise sufficient funds. Metaphor. It's all there is. Make the most of telling some stories. It's all there is. Is that what you mean, he asks me. I nod. Many stories over many years and they're still here; occasionally when we wake up in the morning and the sky is a delicate blue, we can bear our mortality and say to ourselves: it's okay. It really is. We know what's coming and that's part of it. It's part of what we do. Mortality ebbs and flows as the character strengthens and weakens. When we wake up and the sky is blue, promises a fresh day, pushes it away to the edges of the frame where it waits on its own time and its own values. We wake up to grey and it's staring back at you through the window. Wake up alone and it stares through the window just before you throw back the curtains. Corrupts the operating system. Forces a reboot and a re-adjustment. A distraction. Staring into the shaving mirror, the beauty mirror, the picture glass in the hall way. It wanders around on our left side and waits for your gaze to remind you: you are finite. Your children are finite. Your

parents were finite. Mortality is weather dependent. Part of the cover sheet that life comes with. The cover sheet is a text that contains lots of things about what to do and not what to do and reads more or less as a set of rules, but fuzzier than dogma. Gaps to fill your own words in here and there so you construct your own narrative [within very limited limits] or the illusion of your own narrative. If you step back from the cover sheet and squint up your eyes and describe what you see and you get everyone to do this in perfect isolation at the same time: they all describe the same thing. That in itself gives the game way. But no one squints enough.

He smiles at me, let's me reflect a while on my monologue and then asks me: where is the old lady? She isn't in the photograph. No. No you're right. She wasn't there. She died before it all happened. Tell me about that. The old lady had a daughter and a grandson at least. But she chose to live alone; her own husband had gone long ago. Ages ago. She told me about him once. That he worked in a foundry ten hours a day and more if it was there. A hundred men sweated red hot iron hauled into useable shapes, and ignored the sparks permanently filling the air; landing on their backs and arms; burning straight through to the skin. Even though everyday was the same, each man would go home and have his shirts darned, those scorched wholes



endlessly repaired over because they had pride enough to keep up the appearance. The old lady darned his shirts every night. She had food ready for the moment he came home and out on the table. If it wasn't on the table, he could get mean. And when he drank, which was pretty much every night, he got meaner. The old lady had a faint scar on the right of her forehead. He'd stopped for a drink on the way from the foundry and it found him already with a mean spirit. He got home. Sat down at the table. Didn't wash his hands as usual and stared down at his plate of food. Didn't take one mouthful. Stares at the plate awhile. Picked up the plate and hurled it straight. The old lady gets a knock on the back door one afternoon in summer. There's a lad from the foundry out of breath and with a message to come quick! The foundry doors are wide-open and all the foundry-men are straining round in a circle. The old lady appears and the circle parts; the men say nothing but look at the floor. One or two take off their work caps, as people are wont to do at such times. She looks down at her husband stretched out on his back. Two men kneeling by him and one saying something to the other shaking his head. Heart had stopped just like that. Cinder burns on a white linen shirt. A little black soot smudged over the left hand. A drop of sweat settled in the corner of his left eye and now with nowhere else to go.

The old lady hid herself away for a couple of years. But she was liked by the neighbours and they saw her through. And she was old, already old, when a vacancy came up for a manager at the cafe. The neighbours persuaded her to apply for the opening; she'd had some experience with that sort of thing. It gave her a new reason to be here. Always the last one to switch off the light. Cleaning up after the girl had already cleaned up. Keeping the drinks cooler stock-full of fluorescent green fizz, fresh-cut sandwiches under the glass cover, clean table cloth and a real white flower in a vase on each table. She busied herself there for maybe five years? Six? She didn't need the money because she never went out. Spent only on food and basic stuff for the house. She liked flowers. Eventually the tiredness grew. Her hands didn't work like they should and more and more she stayed around the home. Maybe in the garden keeping the borders free of weeds, waiting for the flowers to bloom one after the other all summer long and watching from the back door as the birds ate up seeds in winter. She got a kid to help her out weekends. Young kid of twelve. Bright blue eyes that looked right through you. Even when he was twelve he could see straight into and out the other side if he wanted. Just an average size kid. Not thin. Not fat. Average height. But it was hard to place his parents. That is, it was

hard to place who his kin were. Eyes that couldn't have come from anywhere in the world. Smooth skin essentially white but as dark as white can get. Didn't sit right with his eyes. That old lady was indifferent to him I suppose. So he would say. Always made sure he had a drink and a sandwich at some point and never worked him too hard; polite when they spoke, not patronising, not soft, not anything really. Made sure he was finished plenty of time before dark so he could get to his house a couple of streets away. The kid really liked being there because the lady gave him sweets and green fizzy drink. It went on like that for a while. He was there when she died. Found her on the ground in the front room with the piano. Said she must have fallen over with a heart attack. Looked like she'd just been watching out the window or waiting for someone and then died. Just like her old man. So no: she was gone before the photo.

I adjust my position in the corner of this sofa. Wait for the man to say something. After looking down at his hands for a moment or two he looks up and as he looks up he asks me what I feel about the photograph now. It's so old I say. But the story hasn't changed in all those years. What I mean is: the story the photo tells. It's always been that way and as far as I can tell, it always will be. I reflect on that statement and recalibrate it. It may be.

It may be. It won't be one day. There's always been conflict but that doesn't mean there always will be. No, of course not, the man agrees. And there will be an end or a beginning many years from now. But it's hard to see otherwise. Do you want conflict? Who can say? I'm asking you. Do you want conflict? At some level. Don't we all? Then I recalibrate again. I can't answer that question. We can't answer any question. Why not he asks? Because I can't step outside of me and get to a place where I'm detached enough to care about the answer. But that's the point, surely? It's unusual. He doesn't usually tell me what he thinks or point me to thinking what he thinks, and here I feel he is restricting the outcome. Giving me a lead. I go along with it to see what falls out. I say: yeh I know. We can't step out of history and swim away to some island of perfect detachment. That's a wish. So all we can do is account for our own place in history as best we can. The question is which bits of history, I should add 'the history of others', get stuck to you on the way. Or that you stick to yourself. Whichever. A two-way thing. So the question is more about that. About those bits of history we accrete. So where does that leave you and your wish for conflict? Or not. Conflict is necessary at an abstract level. And horrific at the personal level. The individual. It defies logic. Well, it defies rational logic. It

makes sense in the logic of a dream. You know: where your house is not your house but it is your house. Yes I know, he says. There is a pause in the conversation. The light shafting through the window picks up the dust in the air. Maybe the light causes the dust to move a little. A little extra beyond the other bits of dust and the air currents. And so what is the only conclusion, given that we can't seem to get past conflict? That we throw our hands up and tell each other how terrible that is at the same time as killing your neighbour? Well, I can only conclude that we are in a dream. Or at least the logic of the dream applies.

## XXII

Three black bags lay on the table and the telephone was ringing in the back. That's where it was. The fat waitress leans on the counter staring out the window, too lazy to get the phone. The phone keeps ringing and ringing and she shows no sign of getting the call. Hey! Hey! Go and get the phone. Fat waitress can't believe that a customer's talking to her like that. Moreover, she can't believe it's a guy in a wheelchair doing the shouting. Get the phone it's your job! You aren't just here to serve out donuts and coffee. If the phone rings and no-one answers the phone then you answer the phone! And no-one else is answering the phone. You go and answer it now! NOW! You're a little short tempered aren't you?

The wheelchair-guy turns to glare at me but doesn't reply. The waitress slinks off to get the phone that's still ringing. Black & White Tie shouts after her to bring more coffee. Hey. Do you ever have trouble getting your wheelchair under restaurant tables, I ask. He sighs and relaxes back a bit. Yeh sometimes and you still get restaurants with no ramp. When I come across a restaurant with no ramp I make it my business to wait outside until someone goes in and I ask 'em to send out the manager. When the manager comes

out I give him, or her, sometimes it's her, I give em' a hard time and shake the chair around. Want to give the impression that with just a little more shaking I'll shake right up and take a swing at 'em. Then I ask the manager, or manageress if that's what it is, to get a couple of the cooks or whoever to lift me in to the restaurant, which they usually do, and they usually throw in a free meal to keep me from shaking around anymore.

This faded restaurant has a ramp running along the front and a wide turning area at the top. Really light door that swings both ways. I've never been here before and I won't be here again. It's too far out the way. I nod. Outside the day gets hotter. People waiting for a bus at the stop just outside, lady walking with a pram, couple of suited men coming the other way. Blue sky. Wheelchair guy's leant forward talking to Black & White Tie. Fat waitress is coming back out the kitchen. She's straightened her blouse and apron out. Maybe she's taken a piss? Did she wash her hands? Maybe she took a shit? She comes over to our table and, looking a little nervous, waits for my companions to acknowledge she's there. Which they don't. So I catch her eye and smile. Ummm there was a lady on the phone. She asked me if anyone was in the restaurant with a black bag. She waits for an approving look. She's got wheelchair-guy's attention now. We all

got a black bag! Oh. I see. Well, the lady on the phone told me that if there was anyone with a black bag I should tell them this: meet me at the hotel. Midday. Bring the bag. Said she'd be in the lounge. With someone else. Maybe. That's what she said.

Which one of us are you talking to? Guy in the wheelchair gives her a look like he means it. Ummm. The lady just said anyone with a black bag. Well you must be talking to all three of us I guess! Can I have some more coffee? The waitress blushes a nervous blush and mumbles something about coffee. This hotel. They got a ramp at the front? Black & White glances up and past wheelchair guy and asks me the same thing: yeh. Do they? They have a ramp, I reply. But it's round the side. Main door's up a few steps. Revolving door. Must be the ramp comes up to the side of the lounge. Wheelchair guy shakes his head. So they expect anyone in a wheel chair to wait at this side entrance hoping someone who won't be using the side entrance just happens past to open it? No. There's a buzzer. You buzz when you want to go in. But it's still not enough for the wheel chair guy. He goes on: so they're too cheap to put in an automatic sensor and expect you to wait. Hoping someone heard the buzzer and can then be bothered to come and see who the fuck is buzzing! I take it that's a rhetorical question? It's a question. Well I tell you how it will go:



I'll wait by the front steps. You two go in and tell the manager one of my wheels has locked up and you need help carrying me up the steps. Don't you think that's a little lame? Manager comes out. He's gonna look at me and him, I nod towards Black & White, he's gonna think that we should be able to lift you up just us two. He'd be right. And he's gonna think it's a little strange when he sees what we each have. Well that's the way it's going to be! Or it won't happen. She can wait all day with her thumb up her ass. There's no point in debating this so I tell the two of them okay. Waitress is bringing coffee and we have a cup each. Black with sugar, black with no sugar, white with sugar. Black & White. This is good coffee. Guy in the wheelchair tells him to have a donut. Black & White declines. Wheelchair eats a donut. Waitress has disappeared. Wheelchair to Black & White: tell me something about yourself. Black & White declines that too. I can see Wheelchair getting hot under the collar; starts to fidget around and animates with the empty cup. It's true. I had preconceptions. I had a picture in my head of this mysterious guy in a wheelchair with an ability to read your mind. In this version he was quiet, never spoke unless it was absolutely necessary and speaking is rarely necessary. When we make small talk what we're really saying is: I'm safe. You're safe. No threat here. Even

between couples or friends most talk is a monologue. Each person trying to get their own version of the world out and listening as it comes back to them so they can check it and feel reassured they exist. Rarely interested in what the other person is saying and if you put them on the spot most of them couldn't say what the other just said. They're already preparing their next turn in the conversation; running through the delivery and the impact the delivery's gonna have. Not interested in what you're saying right now. Not at all.

Wheelchair didn't match-up to my mental image of him. He wasn't restrained, he liked to talk and I doubted whether he could read minds. But it all might be a cover. If you were a mind reader the last thing you'd want to do is sit there looking like you were a mind reader. You'd cover it up. Who knows? I'm not a mind reader. My skills lie in a different direction. I break into Wheelchair's cup-animation: how you gonna get there? I'm gonna wheel me; how else? It's a long way. I wheel fast. Black & White asks if I want to ride with him. His car's parked around the back. Nice sleek looking thing. Glossy black with black alloy's, black glass. Even the lights are black. He explains how they manage to get the lights to look black and still work. Put your bag in the trunk with mine, he say's as the lid pops up. Nothing

hiding in there. No-one hiding on the back seat. The door shuts itself behind me with a gentle whoosh. If you got your hand in the door or if there's a kid dangling their blanket out of it the door won't close. That's impressive I tell him. Door like that must be expensive. He grins to himself.

## XXIV

Fade out. The music fades out. I say you're a strange girl. She doesn't reply immediately so I stay: switch channels. She switches channels. I watch the people swaying and stomping in front of me. Unselfconscious. They can't escape the remorseless indefatigable rhythm. Neatly captured music that rumbled on for some ninety years. The rhythm may get displaced every so often. Disguised as something else confused as something else. At some point it finds a way back and rumbles on. This music right now. The bass player pulls at the fat strings like he's shaking hands. The drummer pushes the drums back down. The drums come back up for air. The drummer pushes them down. The number going out now is..... the singer moans and his face contorts to the lyrics. I can't separate the two. The girl spins off into the crowd, drawing people with her. I watch and try to keep rhythm at the same time. But I can't stop me fragmenting into a million different frames. Each frame a possible alternative I can't dismiss. They all come together to make a mess and I can barely hold on to her spinning off into the crowd. But this one girl has split herself into three. At least three. All dark hair. All petite. I can't recall which is which

and who is who. So I try to concentrate hard on the past. Try to latch on to a word or a smell. A look. Come on and try. Come on. Focus. I was responsible for something, but I can't recall. I'm sorry baby. I'm sorry and I'm lonely for you. But it's a fuck lot better than.....something else I can't recall. You have to be there, I guess. You want to play another? Well heck yes.

I slip back to some club in the 1970s. Warm summer, late night. Maybe two or one in the a.m. I watch the scene I'm part of. I can hear the electric piano and feel the ambient warmth of the late-night early morning. The electric piano drops out so smoothly I never notice the space it leaves behind. Then the rhythm changes, the music breaks and the electric piano is there with two perfect chords that freeze the moment. The affect entangled in those chords in that moment connect to different places across time and creates a new space. But it's too small for all of us to enter. Outside the space we remain. It's an oblong building, low, not sure where the door is but the streets around it are wide and the occasional car cruises by. There are a million thousand people with me. But I don't see them. A thing I can't understand is why clothes get dirty. No. Not dirty, take on an odour. Clothes take on an odour. I put on a clean shirt and it smells clean and yet at some time later it smells different. But in

between I didn't notice a difference. You never notice yourself aging. The lines that had appeared in between. You're doing the same thing you were doing ten, no nine fucking years ago. Nine fucking years. No. It was ten years. Ten fucking years. You're working in an engine shop. I'm wearing this shirt. You're pretending to be something. I wear the same shirt, or similar. There's no point in pretending. What is different what is the same? On the left we have: difference! On the right we have: same! On your marks! Get set! Let's just pause for a second to reminisce and let it all come back in to focus. As it was or as it were? And go! Look in the mirror quick quickly now look in the mirror I'm holding up to you. Quick enough to hold on to it? Or did it slip away! Are you the wrinkled version of the young smooth unwrinkled version of you or is it as was. Metonymically speaking, that is.

I watch the people reflected in the plane glass window of this electrical shop. Lit up under a dim yellow light sign. The rows and columns of TV's all contain my face. Staring back at me. I turn to the left. The faces turn to the left. I force a smile. They don't smile. The people pass in between me and all those images of me looking out not smiling. These are big old TV's. Really heavy big old TV's. I'd be ashamed to own one of them. Even the ones at the top of the columns. Slightly bigger

screen. More expensive. The air is still and the night is still. The people come and go but they don't get on the TV's. Just me. I turn around to look at the scene. No cars move along the road and the cars in the lots can't move. They're just flat images painted on the back drop. I step out to the edge of the road and squint up my eyes looking way down to where the street lights get closer and lower and dimmer. I can't see past a point some two hundred feet away. The street seeps into the flat painted backdrop. The lights past that point are smudges of yellow matt on a matt painted backdrop. The figures that walk past me don't say anything and they don't look up from the ground or they don't shift their fixed gaze from straight ahead. They're just part of the backdrop pulled into a different shape and they pass from one end to the other. And back onto the backdrop. They don't stop to look at the TV's.

The door of the club is open and the music rolls out. One of the figures walks up that street and level with the door does a sharp ninety degree turn and goes through. Into the club. A figure, a woman, comes out of the door a few feet, does a sharp ninety degree turn and walks slowly off down the road. I can smell the cigarette smoke. I recognise the brand and look around, expecting her to appear. I watch me turning around and around on the TV sets. Where will I go if

you're not here? The woman turns one hundred and eighty degrees sharp and walks back towards me and stops three feet away staring blankly at my face. I'll see you later, baby. She says. No, I reply. No. I don't think you will see me later. The woman doesn't change her expression. She looks at me unmoved and then repeats herself: I'll see you later, baby. She runs a monochrome flesh coloured hand down the side of her yellow dress. Also monochrome. Dead flat. She has optical black hair and cartoon red lipstick. I'll see you later, baby; she tries again. My lack of response isn't part of the plan.



## XIIV

Where did those men go? What men? He says he didn't notice; had his eyes closed listening to some music the barman had put on. Old couple are still in their beige cotton-mix windproof jackets; stay-pressed pants. They became one person split in two. They are not harmless. Not at all. Sitting back into the chair I get a moment to contemplate what to do about this old couple. Hey! I'm going up when this beer is done. He says he'll turn in too. That tomorrow he can drive and I can watch the grass.

The old couple have both turned to look at me with a shared expression. The expression tells me they are from another time and space. They've slipped between worlds just for me. The fabric of the old man's beige stay-pressed pants resists all attempts at aging. Liquids run off it. The fabric resists looking any different from the day it was made. The old man came with his age pre-programmed. The wrinkles around his mouth, the thin white hair and the sunken cheek all pre-programmed and not the mark of a lifetime of experiences.

It came as a shock when someone realised old age could be commodified and sold as a lifestyle choice. This old couple could be any age from sixteen to six hundred. They may

have made the choice themselves as aging adults or maybe they had been kids given the latest present. You just couldn't tell because the process was just that good. But when the companies cottoned to the fact, a completely new market opened. And it did wonders for the social fabric, breaking down the divisions between the various groups that formed and reformed, some naturally some artificially, as everyone clamoured after the latest thing. On the back of the old-age option, surprising other options came online: the down and out, the terminally ill, the neurotic, psychotic, traumatised, banal, bland and the religious convert. The Housewife. The Man Standing on the Corner. You could opt for any one of these comprehensively valued personas for a minimum of time and pain. And very quickly and for a short period, no-one really knew who anyone else was. There was a sudden and brief collective gasp of realisation and the differences melted away. No one was alienated by a less than pretty face. Scepticism about in-the-head illnesses became just a legitimate and expected response: Oh! That lifestyle choice. No one could tell. That old lady with cancer. May have been the real thing. Maybe not. Cancer had become a life choice; desirable; fashionable; virtuous. What it amounted to was this: the anxiety that normally faced people when faced with a compromised body,

an uncontrollable mass, no longer had to be defended against in the same way. The anxiety didn't have to be consigned to the ill as other. This was how it was for a short time. But eventually, when everything and everyone had become symmetrical and identity had become a global property, the marginalised others, that is the marginalised others that hadn't made a lifestyle choice, vanished. It was a master stroke and it started as just another marketing strategy. They vanished and the official version was there never had been any homeless. No psychiatric patients. No disgruntled housewives. No lower castes. And no-one could remember. But eventually, out of the order, disorder crept back in.

The old man is looking at me. An unsettling smile. Something behind his eyes that I don't know. Which way does the wind blow? You know, I say to the man as I stroll over to him. You know what! I reckon you are no more than thirty years old. Am I right? My processing vacillates between certainty and uncertainty. My fluidity is stretched and hardening into crystalline areas. The old woman now looks up at me and the old couple share that behind-the-eyes smile. I try to recall what happened last time. I remember that there were some birds talking to me and some kids, youths, ending up in an altercation. But what about this old couple?

Or young couple trying to do an old couple? Well, the old woman had a bag with her. An imitation leather, beige, vey beige, cross between a shopping bag and a handbag. I wonder if she had been a man at some point in her early life and had been arbitrarily redesignated as a woman. She/he may have even carried out a suicide in a slightly different time and place. Not here. What a mistake was made that day! XX? XY? XYZ? Dress it up in whatever framework you want. Dress it in a delicate pale gold floral dress. Put it in coarse hare-grey pants. As it stands, someone is making a less than arbitrary decision, and trying to cover it up.

Nonetheless. I have this old/young couple before me and I need to do something about it. They grin at me. I sit down in the soft brown chair next to them and open up a dialogue in which they tell me where they're from, how the dinner was, how proud they are of their daughter the violinist. They affirm each other's stories with the fixed grin and excited nodding. Every now and then the old lady sits forward in her chair and clutches my left elbow. Or the old man slaps my knee. I notice a barely perceptible red stain on the edge of the low table. Why don't you come with us, they ask in unison? Both of them look me straight in the eye and the grin doesn't give an inch. The old man gives a barely perceptible nod, makes as though he's

gonna push himself up out of his seat but gives me the time to agree with the suggestion. I remain. The old woman tries her hand. You can ride in the front. I don't mind. I like it in the back. We can show you round the waterfall. You can stay in the guest room. The old man hovers an inch out of his seat. His hands grasp the chair but show no sign of tiredness. No muscle-fatigue induced trembling of true old age. That's what gives him away and now I know how to play it out. It feels like I'm stood on a record album sleeve. There is some yellow, some black or maybe dark green. Straight lines like a window at night like a scene trying to work itself out. A street scene in the west of the warm country. A club? A music club? Organising all the actors in to a position where they make connections. People are present but they can't be seen. The scene is a memory of a dream or a thought that someone had and so there were never real people there. Just the idea of people. And the music conveys this sense of an idea of a thought too. The scene creates a space that pulls in and positions against this repeated, tapping, clack clack clack clack sound with the electric piano undulant beneath. Over and over. A wind driven pipe plays a parallel tune. The music climbs a circular stair and then back to the bottom to climb again.

Breaking out on top. Light. Space. Climb the stairs again. Goes on for miles.

I suddenly notice that all the pages in the coffee table book that sits by the old man's knee are the same. That is to say: as I look at the side of the book, I notice that each page is a mere micrometre more-or-less wide or narrower than the next, and this gives the book a sense of its own finitude. It restricts it. It's not right. It's not real. The ceiling light cascades horizontal laminar shadows down the book's layered side. It's not the nearly smooth side of a book that has limitless possibilities because I can clearly see the limits of what is possible. The book is limited. It's not an endless story. It has bounded contours and texture. It is less than veridical. It has spaces of coherence and spaces where the coherence smears it around. The old man follows my eye down to the book and he reads my thought, grits his teeth and snarls in the back of his throat. Clenches his fists up. I look for other elements in this scene: low table; fake wood. Plasticised. I notice blank spaces under the chars and table which should otherwise show orange carpet. The red stain is growing. Making its way down the table leg and across the orange carpet. Plastic plant in the corner. Large leaves. No back to the pot. Two dimensional. The music hovers over a beat like a car in a jam. It pushes forward. Swells up! Goes around. The old man hobbles

round toward me fumbling for something in his pocket and muttering with flecks of spittle irrupting from the corners of his tight smooth lips. The hobble smoothes up and he gains a little height. I back off to give him time to change. His pace flows into synch with mine and the years fall away. By the time he's in my face, we're same age and an equal match. More or less. Well, more for me and less for him. He swoops at my throat with a small knife that came down his sleeve. But I have sharper teeth.

## XIV

So this man lived once in a fairly clean house, up along a good road. A good neighbourhood. This was the man I told you about. He works in a store. He limps. He forgets how he got that limp. He had come to the area some years before, looking for a house to rent. The freshness struck him. The fresh painted boards. The cut grass. Really short and uniform cut like a barber. The house was a private rent and the sign in the window told him he could afford to live there. It was a small house but it fitted perfectly in this neighbourhood. Children played in the wide dusty road and their parents assumed they were always somewhere close by. They usually were. None of them went missing. No one came looking to take away the children and no one living on the street had that particular interest. And it was a big neighbourhood. Many blocks. Many types of skin. There was other crime. Burglaries. Beatings. A murder once in a blue moon but that was usually a husband hitting his teenage wife too hard. A spill out from the bar ending in a knife fight. Premeditated? Hard to say. People think about those things in their private times and that may make it premeditation. It's a thin line. Fact apart from that is despite what the media would



have believe, life is not all abduction and worship. That's reserved for certain places, times. Takes a great deal of effort for any neighbourhood to go down that path and for enough people to get on board to keep it alive. Takes a powerful deal of effort and bribery and threats and illocutionary force and the paraphernalia and the right kind of weather. On this street there was not that kind of weather. It rained and it shined. But it never just rained a grey smudged out monotone hue. There was no Sunday Confession. There was no need for religion. The denominations had come plying their trade, set up chapels. Churches. They stayed for a while. Eventually it fell on deaf ears. Or rather: it fell on ears that didn't need to listen. Keep on moving. The city limits are that way. But the neighbourhood was just like a piece of denim. Denim, as in the material. When you own a pair of jeans from new, they start off as blue. All blue of whatever description. You own them long enough and the blue begins to give way to white. The blue denim is always built on a matrix of white cotton. The blue wears away with the years and the white reveals itself in all the places where the hardest work has been done. In that neighbourhood, wherever there was hard work, wherever there was distress and abrasion of the spirit and the potential for the grey amnesia, the white appeared. That was it. It was there all

the time lying under everything else. No one wondered why. No need to. A stylistic choice, perhaps, but the white always came through. Some books have the author's surname and Christian name. Some have just the surname. The latter is supposed to lend weight to the fact. What? You don't know who this author is? You don't know their Christian name? That's your ignorance showing. But the denim still has white below it.

The man, still young, moved in to the clean house. He lived up to that house. There was no demand anywhere from any quarter to live it a certain way or to keep it a certain colour. It just happened like that. He cut the grass like a barber. He lined up the trash cans. He wore the face of one man but it actually wasn't him. It couldn't have been. It must have been someone else completely mistaken for him. On the surface, it all fitted perfectly. It sounded like him. He played the tunes in the same way. They were authentic. But the picture on the surface must have been wrong, an ill fit. He was the different colour in an otherwise white fabric. And people had come a long way in five thousand or so years. Five thousand years ago, man could interpret out what the stars were saying and drag a stone five hundred miles and perfectly align it with the rising yellow sun without even a compass and today there

are lines and arrows to tell you which way to shit. But still the man kept his house freshly painted. For a while. Skip forwards some couple of years and the house is a mound of fly blown cartons and viscous black liquid appearing under the no longer lined up side by side bins.

The question: is this a before and after state of affairs? Is it a slow and insidious evolution? Is there an intervening event? What else came onto the scene? The whole neighbourhood was creeping into the same viscous space. The borders became first unkempt and then tangled. The briar appeared. The cracks in the roads and pavements got wider and flaked off bits of cement for the children to kick around. Earlier, when a strong wind blew up and down the avenues and knocked over boxes and bins the people would chase the scraps of paper and milk cartons up and down the street. Now, the milk cartons stayed where the wind left them and they slowly blended in with the weeds. Fading down to meet the beige vegetation, which never quite made it to green. It came to a point where the symmetry between man and nature, what was taken for nature, got so blurred that the people couldn't look any more. They'd just hurry along, trying to attend in their heads to anything other than the brambles reaching out to them across the pavements; their own

trapped debris and rags beckoning as flags and way markers pointing back to a different space. The white paint developed a grey sheen over the boards, on the road signs. At some point the paint began to shrink and then it began to flake. The exposed wood soaked up the water and the paint curled around the edges, slipping away in the wind. But the people couldn't tell. It was like some eternal recurrence. They'd look at the weathered boards and the roof-felt shrunk back from the eaves, flapping around, and they'd try hard to remember when that had happened. What was it like yesterday? It wasn't like that! Chain link fences turned orange. The grass grew up and through the links and weighted down the fences and pulled them away from the steel posts. The people tried hard to remember who had cut the grass? Who had trimmed the trees? Was it them? Did they have a man come around once a month and do it for them? They couldn't remember. They couldn't remember when they had sat and smiled at the children, watched them play on the lawns. The girls playing with their dolls and setting up shops. Selling sweets. The boys. Chasing around, hiding behind the trees and laughing. They hurried along now past scrap heap gardens and accepted the drunken father throwing a can at a small boy crying in front of the broken go-cart. They accepted the snarling

black dog. They accepted the black viscous ooze. Somewhere between then and now, between the clipped lawn and the yellow of his fingers, nothing had happened and yet it was all different. No-one and no one thing were responsible.

Now the man threw his cartons on the floor. He stacked magazines on the edge of the bottom stair and when the stack was so high he stacked some on the next stair. And then the magazines got papers mixed in with them. Letters. Cuttings. Flattened out cigarette cartons and they stretched all up to the top of the landing and down the opposite stair edge and the man walked in between a path of artefacts. The paper caused him anxiety. He couldn't throw it away because throwing it away meant he may by mistake throw away the one piece of information he needed. The key to it all. And it spread from room to room. There was never a plan. Like the neighbourhood, it just was. He never ever noticed until those occasions when he'd find that a piece of paper had blown into the middle of the ever-narrowing path to the bedrooms. And he'd stop and move it to one side and for a moment he almost remembered what it had been like before. But then he'd carry on up the stairs and the fly screen door would bend a little more. Outside, the children were no longer safe. There was a day

when the man was just going in the front door of house. A sunny day and warm.

The car engine strained in the distance. The sound was far off, but close enough for the man to pick up on it. To attend to it at some unconscious level. It slowed him down. Made him fumble around for something. He had no idea what. The car engine got louder. Some sirens came into the scene. A soft wailing. Two or three. Arguing to see who took the lead. The man, now fully attentive, turned to look up the road. He gripped the plastic food bag in his left hand and the tan car slewed to a halt right there, roaring tires smoking and burning in front of his house with the dust and pebbles taking up all kinds of directions. He didn't know what to think about that. He didn't have a reference for it.

Now see what you think about this: a man up along a road sat in a tan coloured car. Down the road and further on up the road many police cars scream in clouds of dust. The man sees these police. Maybe there's still a way out of this? Maybe I can find redemption. The man thinks it. Those police waving their twelve-gauges at me. I got me a twelve-gauge. I got me a small child on the back seat here. He winds down the window and fires off a lazy shot upwards. Makes those police all lie in the dirt and get down tight behind those doors. Those police start talkin' at him

through bull-horns but he can't make sense of what they're saying.

The small child is crying and the man turns to look at his son but he can't take it all in. It's going too quick for him. It's gone in a flash and he can't remember how they got to that point. A police detective is calling out: it's gonna be okay. We know what happened. The man in the car feels a wave of disappointment. Looks again at his small dark-haired boy on the backseat of the car. Points the twelve-gauge at him just to see what it feels like. Pulls back the hammer on that old gun. The child carries on crying so the man grits his teeth. Then he turns back to look through the side window and he looks up to see a man stood on the porch of wooden house looking back at him. The driver steps out of the car and looks over the tan roof and the man stood on the porch doesn't move.

Over the cacophony of horns and engines and shouts and a million police ordering him, bargaining with him, threatening him; the driver calls out to the man stood on the porch. I'm a Salesman, he says. And as he speaks them, the words seem to take him by surprise. You don't see it coming. You can't. You're too preoccupied with something else. It's a myth that you reach this moment of peace and then just let go. You are, at best, distracted, and never one-hundred percent engaged with what is going on.

I'm a Salesman, the man had shouted. It isn't my natural line of work. I just fell into it. The man on the porch had a plastic bag in his hand. He wore beige coloured pants. A white shirt, but all of that got lost as he watched the Salesman. He ran on parallel tracks for a while and it was some time before the streams came together. But even then he had to fashion them and work them and smooth them and make them fit. What he saw couldn't easily be captured, if at all. It wasn't just that, though. The structures were already in place and so when the Salesman called out to him, it was all ready to go.

He sat down on the rust red sofa and switched on the TV with its old thermo-set plastic dials that gave off that peculiar smell when they got too hot. The screen rounded off at the corners and so the picture never had any edges. The man knelt down. One track replayed what the Salesman did, on a loop. Round and round. It was always there. It interfered with the other channels. He knelt down and clicked the deep brown dial round and round. He came across an old film that may have been black and white but, given that the set was itself black and white, he couldn't tell. A giant crab with human eyes and unarticulated mouth was speaking in a deep echoed voice to the lead hero. A woman/girl of indeterminate age with dark hair and an average face clung to the hero's



arm, and frantically unclipped and dropped the scuba gear she was wearing. The man knelt in front of the screen and tried to focus on the ribs and muscles of the hero as he too discarded his scuba gear. He opened up the connectors in his mind and viewed the scene some years before on that movie set. He squinted up his eyes to get a better view of the director shouting cut and the hero standing up and saying something to someone and the way that his ribs and skin and muscle carried on about their business. He pencilled in the guy holding the microphone boom, wearing a green bomber jacket with a button missing off the left pocket flap, the lady holding some pages of script and a recently deceased brother foremost in her thoughts, the cars pulling up on the other side of the film lot, the busy road just the other side of the studio gates now rolling open on slightly rusting wheels, mountains running up from the desert beyond the city. People hiking in the mountains. But the man could not convince himself that there ever was an actor/hero some decades before on a movie set. He couldn't stop it for long enough. He couldn't freeze the scene and be there. He was unsure that anything had ever happened. He thought about stabbing himself in the heart just to find out if it would all stop or all carry on. If the films were just an illusion and he

had no evidence that the people in them existed beyond that illusion, then what could be trusted?

In recent times, films and TV series always included a self-conscious comment from the actors, the crew. The explosion from a different angle with the shot including all the extras and safety guys and girls stood watching. But this wasn't real either. The producers had cottoned on to the feeling of uneasiness and tried to compensate by bringing a reality back into the frame. It wasn't. It was just another layer. The man watched the crab crawl up the beach on rails or hidden wheels. There was no fucking redeeming narrative that the man kneeling in front of the TV set and banging his fist on the floor could read. He rocked slightly. He was trying to make sense of this crab film and yet he was being hailed by the Salesman. See what you think about this! See what you fucking think about this.

## XVI

There was a boy once upon a time who lived in a small village with his mother, his father and his sister. The village stood nestled in the foothills, beyond which was the longest mountain range in the country. Out of the mountains flowed the green river that wound past the village and away across the plain down to the sea, I start to say. Then a different thought takes hold and the boy fades into grey. Overtaken by the grey threads. Amnesia. The boy is insignificant. He has no value. The thought requires a thinker. To whom does the boy have no value? To the thing which lies beyond life and to which we all aspire. We don't realise it. That is not death. Death does not lie beyond life. Death is not the opposite of life, I say to the man and sit forward in the chair: we are not trying to avoid death with our body enhancements, our injections and the sun treatment.

What would it all look like without death? We take up a position with a different relation. The human form isn't our final evolution. Our final evolution is a dispersal of scale. It's not a posthuman. It's not a human with enlarged eyes and frontal cortex. That's about a cartoon posthuman. For some straightforward plagiarism: where

humanists saw themselves as distinct beings/an antagonistic relationship with their surroundings, posthumans regarded their own being as embodied in an extended technological world. There was a repositioning of matter. What it really was, was a splash of flame against a blue background some four thousand miles way. Nothing to get worked up about, at that distance. Just a moment's inconvenience and a micro in the spacetime. Our so-called fundamental drive – to life or maybe death – has been misunderstood. We exist not as a thing but as a process that the matter of our bodies cannot escape. But of course, says the man.

I carry on: we are misled by the scale of things and the time it takes as matter accretes to us and away from us. You have to see beyond life. You have to hear what is beyond life. At any one moment: we are all capable of giving it up and nothing at all would be lost. A down-going where nothing is lost. I stop and look up at the old man, looking for a mirror of these last words. The old man sits back in his chair.

Is that your wish? His face is earnest. He doesn't pre-empt an answer. How can I tell if it's a wish? A wish: identical to reality? Man is to life what life is to death. An anomaly. For you, the man says. What about the others? I say that there are no regularities.

There are only separate cases. The evolution of man moves towards mankind as part of a universal becoming. Billions of individual becomings becoming a becoming! The old man laughs! I see why, but I reframe it. The future of man lies in reaching a point where each individual is able to become themselves, but all of those becoming selves are always becoming in relation to every other becoming self. And there is no self or selves in the first place. So there never is a single no individual becoming. This is the hive mind. No. It is the post-hive mind. The Metahivemind? All are simultaneously one and myriad individuals. Actually no mind at all. That doesn't fit either. No will-to-anything. All of that shit is about the individual. And all of that other shit is about the collective. This is neither. It's both. It's about a post-posthuman, I say. It's about evolution into something. I start to sweat.

Well of course, says the old man. Evolution is always a move into something. Have you thought this through, he says, leaning forward and resting his chin in his hands and his elbows on his knees. Have you thought this, though? Are you certain of anything, any one part of it? So I say: we fight certain values. Certain moralities certain ways of being. Positioning, judgements, histories. What if we decouple from all of that? What if we resist all? Where you end up, I think, is

psychosis, says the old man. That's another value judgment. Do you want to risk that, asks the old man? The young boy and his father. Guns. War. Fragmentation. Dislocation. I adjust my position in the corner of this sofa. Wait for the man to say something. He says it's time. Time is up.

I walk out into the sunlight of the street. The wide pavement and the lazy cars. It became too tiring. I had to walk away. It coincided with the old man telling me time was up. Is up. Some people leave life a hell of a lot quicker than they entered it. Some people never realise they've gone. They die so quickly, say by a gunshot to the back of the head or a tree falling on the car and crushing them flat. Smearing them down the road. They never have time to register it. In that sense, life appears to be an either/or situation. But all deaths involves that same either/or situation.

I glance in the windows of the cheap shops I pass. I see old ladies buying cheap soap and small girls and boys deliberating over the cheap sweets. The same momentary contingencies that lead to a choice irrespective of where the agency for the choice is rooted or diffused. A kind of reverse death. An inverted death. The ability for things to come together as an action. Death is the same thing: things come together and effect an action. But I still couldn't work out

what went on at that exact moment when what is called a life comes, or is called, to an end. And I have seen – I am sure I have said this: I have seen many ends. When my Father died I was with him. He got a chest pain one night at around 10:15 p.m. My Mother had called and said something like: your Dad's got a chest pain and I called an ambulance. I was sober. Having decided to give myself four months on the wagon. So that was lucky break #1. I arrived to find my Dad sat on the sofa, head throwing back and forth in absolute agony, centred on the dead centre of his chest. His sternum. No pain on in his left arm. No tight chest no blue lips nothing to point at a fucked-up heart. So I took a lot of comfort from that, in a clichéd all of my friends are dying but not my Dad kind of way. Slightly surreal. Detached at this time. Anyway. Many years before I had a similar episode. Chest pain that came from nowhere and felt like the Devil was giving me the fingering of a lifetime. Never was. Wired me up, normal rhythm, careful stayed, careless didn't die, inflamed gullet. Food pipe. Acid. So of course my Dad had the same. Death was not on the menu. Mum was keeping her shit together on the outside. Fuck knows what was in her head. Anyway. Paramedic appears, asks my Dad some banal shit to keep him focussed and calm. How old? What did you work at? Said: let's get your

shirt off and wire you up. Which he did. Then I saw my Dad's body for the first time in, what, thirty years? That was the first shock: Goddamn! Goddamn! This isn't my Dad. This is an old fucking man with an old fucking man's body. Second shock: things may not pan out too well. I suddenly lost my faith that his body had some say in this. Muscle tone: gone. Blemishes, pallor, stains. Where was my Dad's body? This was some old guy I never saw coming. Because I had not seen his flesh for some thirty years, my Dad was just his face. The way he looked at me. And this was the time that my Dad said: I think this is the end. Straight up. Verbatim. And this is the funny thing: I still had indigestion in my head and had told him my story several times by now. So I genuinely believed that, and at the same time I had to reconcile the surprise of an old body with the melodrama insight of: I think this is the end. You know they say how one and one make two: this cliché didn't add up. I was perfectly fucking aware of these different streams of affect/thought playing through my head. Each one led to a different outcome and it's the best evidence I got so far for the existence of the multiverse. No. It isn't. I've been really rational since then and kept my shit together like a Champion! It was a paradox I couldn't resolve. Maybe death was the necessary event that rendered life meaningful, froze it in place? I



had been misled, perhaps. There appears to be a definite before and after state of affairs, with death before life and death after life. Same thing. Nothing to worry about. But what makes the two things categorically different? On who or what terms are those categories? I've seen many endings and stared right into the eyes of the dying to try to pin down that precise moment. But it always escapes. You don't see it and that in itself is significant. At the moment that life slides in to death you realise they can't be separate categories. The conclusion I came to was that there is no moment. No event. Just a rearrangement of all the bits and pieces that had become implicated and whilst we are preoccupied with what the central actor in front of us is doing, the whole arrangement is gently stretching its legs and reaching around to grasp different things and different things are reaching out to it, getting in its way, laying on its tracks. The thing that makes the difference is perspective.

Taking a breath. Exhaling and relaxing and shifting the balance around a bit. One of the actors fades out the picture. Or leaves quickly. What we call life is diffused through the things that come together and that suggests that life is not a quality of an individual. It's a quality of the collective. This is a most superficial insight. Where did the illusion that it is an individual quality start?

## VIII

I walk the road. Children unwrap their one-coin sweets. Old ladies drop soap bars to the bottom of their plastic shopping bags. I walk on down the pavement. At the end of this short section of sidewalk I stop and wait at a junction to cross. A few cars and a bus go past and then the sign changes and I cross. As I get to the other side I attend to the low-down throbbing of a motorcycle engine to my left and turn to look at a blue chopper. I walk into someone stood still in front of me and the collision, no damage done, makes me jump back with a start. I have to seriously question my ability to see things coming.

The man looks at me. Dark matted long straggly hair, like tendrils. Dirty skin. Dirt worn right in and down to the bone. Dark and long tattered clothes. A shabby tattered long coat that might have been black or charcoal. Sorry I didn't see you. You okay? The man stamps a foot and draws in a deep and meaningful breath which he cuts short and holds right at the apex. The world ended two weeks ago. On March Seventeenth. We don't exist. And that's all he says. The mid-summer heat beats down the dirt further into his skin and the breeze whips his hair into shapes. If we don't exist. Who are we? The shapes change. A dust devil spins around this

figure and throws up the torn coat fabric. Merges with him into a hazy series of charcoal sketches. I step back and away from the hair tendrils trying to whip across my face. Otherwise leave a stinging red line. I have a memory of this symbol and I tell him: what did you try to tell me? The dust devil vanishes and the tendrils fall still. The coat becomes a coat. It's something about turning a corner and coming face to face with the thing that would stop you in your tracks. The thing that goes with you wherever you go. You know what it is. You know what it is but every time you turn that corner you hold your breath you screw it all up and: it's not there. And the next corner and the next and the next and the next and then one time when you do relax because every other corner has nothing to hide: it comes right up into the picture and your heart stops. And it's your turn to leave, so that all the parts can adjust themselves. Adopt a new pose. A new constellation. An absence connected to all these other things.

The chopper engine thumps away. Every now and then the guy screws back the throttle and the thumping ramps itself and breaks up mountains and boulders. A guy on a blue chopper motorcycle. Leaves dust drifting around the shiny pipes and shiny rims. Metallic blue tank and hard-tail frame. This guy on the chopper is looking over to me.

Large bear [bare] arms and shoulders under a cut off denim big guy. A good layer of fat hiding the contours but strong as an ancient figure. Big grin on his face like something made him glad. He gives me a wave with a pale gloved right hand and shouts over that engine: what do you think about this? Do I know you; I shout back. He throws the engine up again a couple of times and the bike sits low down on the road. Long time ago, man! Long time ago! Where have you been all that time? He grins even more at my question. I was right here. Always have been. Always will be. Grins some more and throws a laugh to himself; lets out the clutch.

People walk up and down the pavement and young girls buy sweets in the cheap sweet shops. It's a very clear, blue day with a slight warm breeze gently picking up fragments of paper and lifting them gently round the corners of the buildings. What is a life but fragments on a breeze? Shapes coming into the scene and shapes leaving the scene. A tune heard as a child that lingers and meanders in and out of the years. A tune that carries a million histories all clinging on to its tail. The war you read about but never saw. The soldiers' bodies. The dead horses' broken walls, streams of the dispossessed. Suitcases spilling out a million different historic water filled puddles, flowers pushing past the shattered stones. Rivers. Seas. Clouds. Clean

washing blowing in the wind. Young children with expressionless faces. Young children laughing and rolling a glass bottle back and forth. Clean roads and new houses. Made up gardens. Time. Made up time. Blue clear days. Like this. A million histories all spilling around and clinging on. But the thing is: they're not you're histories. That is: they're not something you created. They came to you by chance, were tangled up. You can try to leave it all behind but the figure with tendrils for hair, the scorched face, the torn coat: he lingers too as a truth you've always known. Nothing new about that. But his style shifts and evolves. He, or it, or she, or you, are a shape shifter. One day you get to embrace him. It always comes back to him. You get to spin round and round and the tendrils fly out and the black cape makes great sweeping arcs that cut space and time. Out of this world. As that end approaches you have an infinite number of opportunities to rearrange all the pieces and put them together as a better shape that you can happily end with. That moment in a bar: twenty years before when you should have done that and not this. That girl who smiled at you and you smiled at the glass in your hand. The right turn you took and you should have turned left. The moment when your Lover looks into your eyes for something you don't have. And never had. It was just a story they confused. These

things get spaced out to the ends of the universe right at the end for just a brief second and they hang there as balanced forces in perfect tension. You can make them hang there for an eternity that lasts a million millionth of a millisecond and then they come racing back in to take up this last, different, better form. It's one end amongst many.

## X

How much further are we going? She isn't really asking me. Just thinking aloud. The steering wheel sways gently side to side in time with the music. We pass along gravel roads skirted by pine woods. The rolling ground stacked over with brown dry needles; dry cracked branches fallen from the dark green canopy. We're going up around this bend a while, then down a hill and that's pretty much it. What is it? It's a ten-star hotel! That I doubt. You never even took us to a no-star hotel. The track starts down the shallow hill. The wood falls away to the left and reveals the scale of the wilderness around us. A clearing here and there. A patch of open grass maybe freed up by a lightning strike. A fire. Re-growth. The endless cycle that some might call nature. They have remote towers in places like this where some lone man or woman spends the summer months watching out for grey white plumes of smoke rising up, sometimes fifty miles away. She isn't listening to me. Then they call in a plane to fly over the smoke to assess what's going on. Sometimes they do that and sometimes they let a fire burn. The plane calls in another plane to drop a suppressant on the fire or, if it's warranted and safe enough to do so, a team of fire-fighter

parachutists complete with shovels, beaters, blankets. It's a complicated situation.

Fires have been catching fire for millions of years before men were around to beat them out. Accepted logic is that it's a good thing. Re-growth. New species. Released nutrients. Space and so on. But if there is no fire then that particular patch of forest maintains a quiet, shady existence. The deer creep past unseen. It doesn't matter what happens. Either way works. Drop man in to the picture and sometimes that fire has to put out. It's a reasonable thing. Maybe if the fire eats its way round and down and round down the mountain to the outskirts of town. Stands up on itself and waits for the weather and the wooden buildings to come together. Watches people sweating up ditches with tiny spades and barrows dragging away wooden food. But as with the patch of scorched forest: if the town burns, it re-grows. It re-seeds. So what's the point of the fire towers? Why not just stand back and see what pans out?

It's not man's way, I tell her. But it could be about embracing the arrangement of things as they descend together. Something about throwing all the bones up and letting them fall and scatter and making sense of the shapes. There are watch towers stood on the hills. It's jungle land. People don't want their houses to burn. Take your feet off the dashboard. I don't like it when she puts her



feet on the dashboard. She says she doesn't have any shoes on so it won't do any harm. Maybe, but I don't like it. She asks me why not. Don't you like my feet? Your particular feet don't have anything to do with it that I can tell. I just don't want them on my dashboard. She looks out the window and wriggles her toes. But she doesn't take her feet off the dashboard, which is walnut veneered and shiny as hell. I'm the one who shines it. She rubs her feet around laughing to herself. The wax shine is becoming blurred. It mingles with the natural oils of her skin. Some of the car wax makes its way through that skin and into her body. The light breaks up in a million different directions. I tell her I wax the wood veneer all-round the car once every week and then I try not to touch it. I explain that inevitably I do touch it either by necessity or a chance passing of the hand as I reach for something or other. So I then I polish it again and so on. It doesn't give me any pleasure polishing it and when I have polished it, I feel nothing. It's just that it needs to be polished. I look at the deep shine. I look at the swirl of deep dark browns and streams of beige black. No irritation from having to polish it and no pleasure from having done so. Nothing. As I reflect this to her, I realise that the polished wood and me have no relationship at all, other than being in the same proximity.

And that proximity as far as I can tell rested on the chance purchase of a car that a neighbour, who had walked across to me one day from his garden, asked me if I wanted to make an offer.

The car is black, shiny, old and large. With a large trunk and so much leg room in the front that, if the passenger puts the seat back and stretched out their legs and feet as far as they could, there was still another foot of space between them and the bulkhead under the dashboard.

She remains cheerful. She wriggles her toes around some more. Small feet. The walnut veneer disappears under toe shaped smudges. Look. Do you want me to pull under those trees over there and kill you? Why would you want to do that? It's just one of the options open to me. You have your feet on my dashboard. I don't want them there. I could park under those trees and kill you and then your feet wouldn't be on my dashboard. I could polish it. It's an option amongst many. I'm trying hard to decide what part I play in that. She leans on to my shoulder and asks: have you any better alternatives? I suspect the innuendo and the way she looks up at me from under her eyelids. Coy, or an attempt at coy. I reply: not really. That's the one I'm going to choose: the one I described. Why would you choose such a destructive course of action? She takes her feet off the dashboard.

Tucks them under her seat. Sits back in the seat and folds her arms. It would be destructive for you. Or at least for your body. And your family and so on. But on other terms it may be beneficial. Universal terms, that is. Not that I believe the universe has any innate purpose beyond itself. Woooh back up! Sorry. I should have said 'beyond itself'. I didn't mean to confer any character on it. The girl begins a low-down moan of faux despair. She has heard this a million times, so she tells me; a million times. Well look at this way: sometimes there are areas of order and sometimes areas of disorder. The two go hand in hand but you can't predict when one is gonna flip into the other. Well, not with the precision you believe in. The road tracks round to the right and up another slight incline. But seeing as your body even in a basic sense represents order, then killing you, breaking up the body, would flip this little part of the universe into disorder. The universe might like that! And don't you think it's odd that given the slightest nudge, anybody, any living thing slowly or rapidly depending on the conditions slips into some state of decayed disintegration. Disintegration, I emphasise. Bits seeping out. Molecules flying off with other molecules, turning green turning black, gases, flaking nails, changing shapes. It's like the universe abhors a body. Slightest

opportunity and it runs that body back into little bits. Too organised. All I would do is speed that up a little. Doesn't take much to get it back to a less ordered state. You see, and I stop the car here to turn and look at the girl to emphasise what I am about to tell her and the car crunches to a halt on the gravel track; throws up the dust. This is what I tell her: your despair is a significant move in the right direction. There's an uneasy look creeping onto her face and she says nothing. That feeling you starting to feel: that's the beginning of a universal state of affairs and let's face it: we all want to be at one with the universe, don't we! This is your chance! You want to be at one with the universe. And your self? You don't have one, by the way. But apart from that you just have to give up this thing you call life. You have to let go of the history of all your beliefs and all of history's values that even at this precise moment are convincingly animating that lump of matter that you call your body which, let's face it, just last week was a dozen cans of cheap hot dogs, a waffle, some donuts – I recall seeing you eat a donut – and a litre of fizzy shit. She squirms around a little. They're not, of course. Animating your body, I mean. You may have that conviction and I won't be able to shake you out of that. Just thought I'd mention it. This girl with dark hair, slim figure. Finely defined and contemporarily

attractive face in a flowered dress and with bare feet is at a point in the universe that splits off in two or many directions. Up above the car, a single buzzard circles. He says to the universe with the piercing, melancholy cry that buzzards do: here I am. For now.

The sky is blue. The sky is still and warm. The green forest is alive. There is a pause..... It's about trying to bring order into disorder. After all the millennia, that's the only thing that joins up all the dots. But it's a struggle against the tide, against the hoard of clay giants running against you. The cut on the front of the philosophy book that d----- everything inside it. A girl sat on the edge of an old photograph. Looking inwards. Looking into the distance. Everyone else focussed on the best man. The girl focussed on a different version. A finite version that will not be realised. The girl looks out of her photo to the boy sat in his photo. The boy was still sat staring into the distance, with the cloth sack at his side; holding the top with his right hand; turned slightly towards it. His sister may have been dead beside him. A bag hiding her dark hair and fine features that were now caved in, blown out, falling apart. At one with the universe or moving that way, at least. She had been under the bag for ten years. Twelve years? Five years more than I reckoned with. Laying in a meadow. Laying in a forest

clearing. When the boy removed the bag to look at his sister's face he didn't register the scene.

There is a difference between being next to the living and next to the dead. When humans come close together, infinite opportunities all split off to different outcomes and all of them feedback on themselves and then you can feel the life around you. Being close to another living human, you feel all those different possibilities just waiting to split off. Most often we just choose the easiest dimension to slip into and the moment we do, all the other dimensions may collapse. Or they may have been created there and then. They swirl and swell and fill you up and the human face registers one opportunity or one path over another. Even in a photograph. It's no surprise that photographs follow us like trails. Or rather: we leave them as trails for history to make use of. However: look at a photograph of the dead and the trail stops there. The infinite versions collapse to one outcome. No chance of life. No path leading onwards and that diminishes your potential to live. And that, of course, diminishes you. For every death, each of us dies a little more. When I look at the boy, I wanted an outcome for him that was different. But his sister had prevented that. She determined his path, his becoming. A point in time just before all the

versions split off in a billion directions. A billion different outcomes collapse onto themselves, to one. The final reckoning. I look across at the girl sat by me with the dark hair.

I rewind the scene so that she still has her feet on the dashboard. She squiggles round her toes and smudges the wax veneer and then she looks at me for a reaction, bursting out with mischief and life. Her legs and feet are stretched out towards the bulkhead under the dashboard. I try to bring the pieces back into order and force a different version upon the universe. And the universe yields. You're not easy to live with, she says. Are you? The way you talk. The way you are. I'm not sure what you're about. I tell her it's about something like teasing this ball of twine out into all the little threads and a million colours. Or maybe it's a Werewolf. She takes her feet off the dashboard. Tucks them under her seat.

## IX

Yes. It was the Werewolf, he said. I ask him what happened. Just appeared from the black. Ran at me. Round the back of the car. How did you get away? He looks at me. Stares straight in. Says nothing. Pushes his lips up with an 'I don't know what to make of it' expression. Gives a slow and slight shake of his head. So how did you get away this time? That's the third time? Fourth time? How you get away? The sky grows pale blue, and the breeze is already warm, despite the cold desert night. I guess it just changes its mind each time. Wants to slice me up but always stops short. It can't. What is it? Some silver cross round your neck? He pulls down the neck of his brown checked shirt: you know that isn't ever gonna be here; he gestures to his throat. So what stops it? You have to ask yourself that? He answers cryptically and pushes up his left eyebrow, left side of his mouth. You ask yourself that. I'll drive. You ask yourself that. Give me a cigarette. I drive. He flicks the butt out the window. We still have some way to wind down the road to the valley floor. The desert warms up quickly and the needle cold desert night feels like an impossibility. I wind down the window and can hear the dry suspension creaking and straining us down the mountain. I comment



on this. I say: suspension is creaking on my side. The back. Hear it? What do you think? It's fine. It's the dust. Gets under the rubber boot. Dries up the oil. It's fine. How long to the bottom? Twenty minutes. Fifteen if you put your foot down. I tell him the plan is to stay on the road, intact, in one piece. Check the map. Where does this track come out? He leans into the back and pulls out the bent up yellow road map. Folds it round. Turns it. Shakes it flat. According to this map, we're not on a road. It's an old map, I explain. This is a new track. It wasn't here last year. Then how do you expect to know where this track comes out? It's a reasonable question, which implies my failure to give him the full details. Which I can't, at least, not yet. I will. I have to. Without the full details we can't complete the job in hand. So for now I have to cover my tracks. Give me a cigarette. Will you light it up for me? He pulls two cigarettes from his pack, puts them side by side in his mouth, lights them up with a wind-proof lighter. Click. Just a-click. He passes me the left one and draws deeply on the right one. I sit back up and clamp the cigarette in my teeth; slightly off centre; slightly to the right; draw in whilst opening up the left side of my lips so that along with the smoke I get mixed in fresh air. It dilutes the smoke. Makes me feel better. I take another draw and then hold the cigarette in my right hand.

When I said: where do we come out, what I meant was: if you look at where the next town is and the highway, and you look at where we were last night, you can triangulate where we are going to hit the road. The main road. I can feel him looking at me and weighing it up. But I stay focussed on the track descending down to the valley below us. He turns to the map, I sense, and tells me we hit the floor about two miles from the highway, fifteen miles from town and another three hours from the drop off point.

There's a dull thud from the trunk of the car. That's the first time he's made a sound. Yeh. I figured he would have said something by now. Shouted out. Seeing as he got shot. Maybe it's shock through and through? I think about that and draw on the cigarette. Maybe it's the shock. I agree with my previous idea. So traumatised he didn't know what to fit it into. Couldn't make sense of the narrative? Well that might work for anyone else. The driver is gonna lay out the alternative: he sees that every day. Blood. People getting their stories disrupted by someone like you. He must have a template for that. A narrative. So surely he can fit himself into his own story? Can imagine himself into it? That's why he didn't make a sound. Until now. He made sense of this years ago, knew it was part of his timeline.

No trauma to be had if you got a box to put it in.

The cigarette gets to the mark where I flick it out into the desert and glance in the mirror as it lands next to a broken branch pointing back the way we came. Well. Just because he has a placeholder for it, doesn't mean he's not gonna shit himself when the time comes. Metaphorically or literally? Both, I answer.

We bump on down to the town below. Not much else happens. No more thuds. Until we get to the town. So we're driving down into this valley but it's not him and me. It's her and me. The road is an edge-of-the seat of affair. Gripping on to the door handle as if it's gonna stop the car tumbling off the mountain side. The road sweeps up and around. It drops out, tight corners with the horizon a long way off. Distant hills. Shrivelled cacti come right up to the tarmac; big glazed dried out cacti withered ends. Thick spikes stuck out of the ribbed leaves. If that's what they are. When it rains hard the cacti grab all the water they can and swell up fast, the rib expansion like some fat guy slipping his belt up a notch. I can't tell if they're dead. Looks like somebody beat them with a club. They occupy this strange space where they could be alive but could be departed. Endless numbered days out here on the mountain-sides.

The car struggles around and up a turn. Very steep but it's a cut through so the walls are up either side of us. We get to the top. You can see blue sky the other side of the drop off as the car loses its momentum to almost a stop. Then we sit right on the tipping point and the view see-saws down opens out and away and because time has stopped I take in every grain of sand, every change of red hue in the rock walls falling away from us and the blades of grey green grass frozen in a timeless breeze. The valley opens up. In winter. In summer. I fly down the road taking it all in: narrow drainage gully on either side, camouflaged trees with silver grey green yellow patched bark, scrub, small rocks, large rocks, the road speeds up, the car speeds up, mountain ridges up on my left and the wider expanse of the valley to the right past distant rock brown fields and rock walls. You can forgive a body. Can't forgive a face. But you can raise a can of beer on high and seal your fate. What we need to think about is having more woodlands, more diverse native species, and having those woods better connected. Eat less. Grow more. Somebody once said that, or similar. On one hand this a judicious statement. But this rationalism belies its conflation with metaphoric content that works on an affective level. As always. This statement is empty rhetoric but, given its entanglement with the way that affect has

been mobilised, it resonates in the same register. In this way, you kind of feel something. It kind of leaves you feeling that something useful has been said, that action will result; but not what. However, the entanglement with metaphor resonates and the metaphor obtains a significance that is both unwanted and extends far beyond the intentions of the communicator. For sure: not the fuck what you meant. That seems to apply here at least in how you are the one sat in the chair and I am the one with a rope around your neck. A metaphoric rope. It's literally a knife.

You see, I continue to the man in the chair, you see: I have this feeling your luck is none too good. This knife in my hand, keeps calling me 'master' and that implies that whatever it does is what I tell it to. I lean in to the man's ear. But I swear that the damn thing just seems to do its own thing. I just happen to have it in my hand when it does what it does. It really isn't me. The man gurgles something through the white cotton gag and he tries to rock out of his wheel chair. Grunting. Spinning. I've let the tires down, I tell him. Followed by a giggle. I've let the tires down. But I also shoved a bar through your spokes so you aren't wheeling anywhere. I just let the tires down for fun. It's this intangible feeling of something that indicates the problem. But it also suggests something of

how these framings constellate at the social level and become shared means of understanding things. You follow me? You see how this is all framed? You worked the framings out yet? Possibly not. Like the fact you are in a wheel chair and when you wheel down the street that has an impact. It doesn't go unnoticed. Really. It doesn't. Are you doing that on purpose? Wheeling down the street in that way you do, I mean. The problem implies a rationalised account of how the media frames this kind of thing. You know: people in wheel chairs. People on crutches. Fat people. Thin people. Different people. How your person in the street, as it were, is constructed, with cues for public understanding and which they would have you think results in a change in public opinion on ambivalent and controversial issues, such as the fact.

The mundanity of it all. Every mundane thing gets elevated to the status of some fucking Saint. You got one arm? You got it made! You got one leg? You got it made! You got cancer? You got it made! No no no, you can't have had cancer. You have to have cancer. That makes you a here and now hero. If you had it, you got nothing else to say and the people: they need new cancer. Now I think of it, there's a fucking gold mine right there: somebody needs to invent a new cancer. A 'cancer of the something' that no

one has ever had. That story would sell like fur coats in a fucking snowstorm.

I prod the man in the back, just to make sure he is listening. That fact I mentioned: you are in a wheel chair. That's a symbol, you see. Your wheel chair. None of these symbols work in any kind of unitary manner. People love you in your fucking wheel chair. The Wheel chair guy is still rocking. In contrast, I argue that with stories such as the one in question, there are layers of conflict and ambiguity which result not only in a lack of convergence but also in an enhanced ambivalence about the topic in question. On the other hand I, me [I pat me on the chest, just so he is sure who I mean] argue that knowledge is differentially and unpredictably representative and that undermines any simple communication. No one cares about you in your wheel chair until the moment that things fall out that way. Then the fact they don't care is replaced. But there are no facts to which we can appeal to decisively resolve these types of disputes. Do you follow?

More grunting and spinning.

And then I go on to suggest that the problem in-part stems from the belief in an objective material reality that exists apart from our affective relation to it and which can be represented in its objectivity by scientific practices. The same applies to you stuck in

your wheel chair. Our work here, yours and mine, what we are attempting is predicated on being able to account for the problems associated with it from a rational perspective. Like I just said: that can't happen. It's just a wish. You got to accept that this is an ambivalent state of affairs and the only thing you can do is accept that ambivalence. Stay in touch with the fact it's all a fantasy and that, in a very short while, even though most potential outcomes are going to collapse, that collapse is not going to converge on some real outcome where you get up and walk away from this. I laugh a little. That's a funny thing I said there! What I meant to say was: you aren't walking away from this. I'm surprised you didn't stop walking years ago. With that bulging gut straining under your black shirt, doing its best not to spill out your regulation black synthetic trousers. No wonder you had that limp all those years ago. Progressed to this wheel chair, or at the very least gave you a hand. Didn't it? Along with that gunshot. How did you feel about that?

I am genuinely interested in what he has to say, but whatever he has to say doesn't make any sense. I can't understand him. The gag makes his words sound like car that won't start. I step back a little. He's really trying to shake himself free. So much so that the bar slips out from the left wheel and he starts to



bump round in a left handed circle. After three full turns I detach from the absurdity and switch it back on. Holding the knife towards him, gesticulate that he best stop. Which he does. Clearly out of breath, the sweat runs down his great fat head down his fat neck, only to get lost in the folds there. Pooling, I imagine, until it is seeped and soaked all around. How many times are we going to do this and in how many different ways? Do you know? He shakes his head and some sweat falls on my left boot. The telephone was ringing in the back.

# Prologue/Epilogue

**Y**ou must listen intently to the sound in your ears. It's a carrier signal. The message is layered into it. You have to separate the two. Turn the message into the signal. The message tells you. Follow what the message says. It's easiest to separate the message when you are lying-down. Go and lie down.

So I do. I go and lie down, for a while, on the dust-red sofa, grip the grimed-up arm. The dirty yellow lamp across the way, throwing out a feeble glow casts as some ante room to the timeless void. Who do you love? Just me. That's all she says. I move onto my left elbow and look across at the woman. Who do you love? Just me. She says again. The yellow light frames her like a dark space. Listen. I say to her after a while: listen to that. What's your point, she asks? I just want to know if you hear that. Yes I hear it. What do you want to know? I lay back on my back. There's something wrong with me, I think. Thick air pushes down the dust. And the red sofa is slowly fading away even as I lay on it. There is nothing wrong. This is the way it is. You mean in some kind of predestined type thing. No. No no not like that. Not at all. It isn't like that, she says. I turn again to look at her as a dark space in the yellow. Do you have dark

hair? She replies: maybe. Can't you see it? Can't you see the colour of the dress I'm wearing? I wait for the haze to clear for a moment; the haze that flows in and out and around us. I wait for a moment. A pause. A gap. A lucid gap into which I can make something. I feel a compulsion to get up and get into the light. Get a sense of her. But the compulsion isn't strong enough. It doesn't matter that much. The moment passes along with the rest. The yellow lamp becomes relatively brighter. So I lay back on my back and try to define what she looks like in my mind's eye. The outline of her face swims and blurs and freezes and fades in, out, squares of overlapping colours transform in a way that resists bringing in the resolution. I stop it. This is the best way, I conclude. It's the best way because it means I don't care enough and that in itself is success. It's the best way because I avoid imposing yet another fiction on the world. So I let her go completely and then, when I ask again if she can hear it, there comes no reply.

It never was of consequence, after all. Just part of the contingency of being. I lean back on my elbow and there is only space and the signal; that now I have to respond to. The telephone is ringing and I have to go and answer it. How does the telephone sound? It sounds like this: [space]. How does the telephone look? It looks like this: [space]. The

Yellow light is filling the room with an intensity pushing out all the shadows. It lifts up the dust that covers the furniture; the sofa, the chair, the table. The dust converges into a dense point, absolutely in centre of this room. It converges to a point and then that point disappears into itself. A small space is left and the Yellow light has to bend around it and I have to move my head just to one side as I pass to the telephone. I pick up the phone. Put the set to my ear and listen. As soon as I pick it up, the carrier signal gives way and I get ready for the message. Here it

is: [ . . . ]